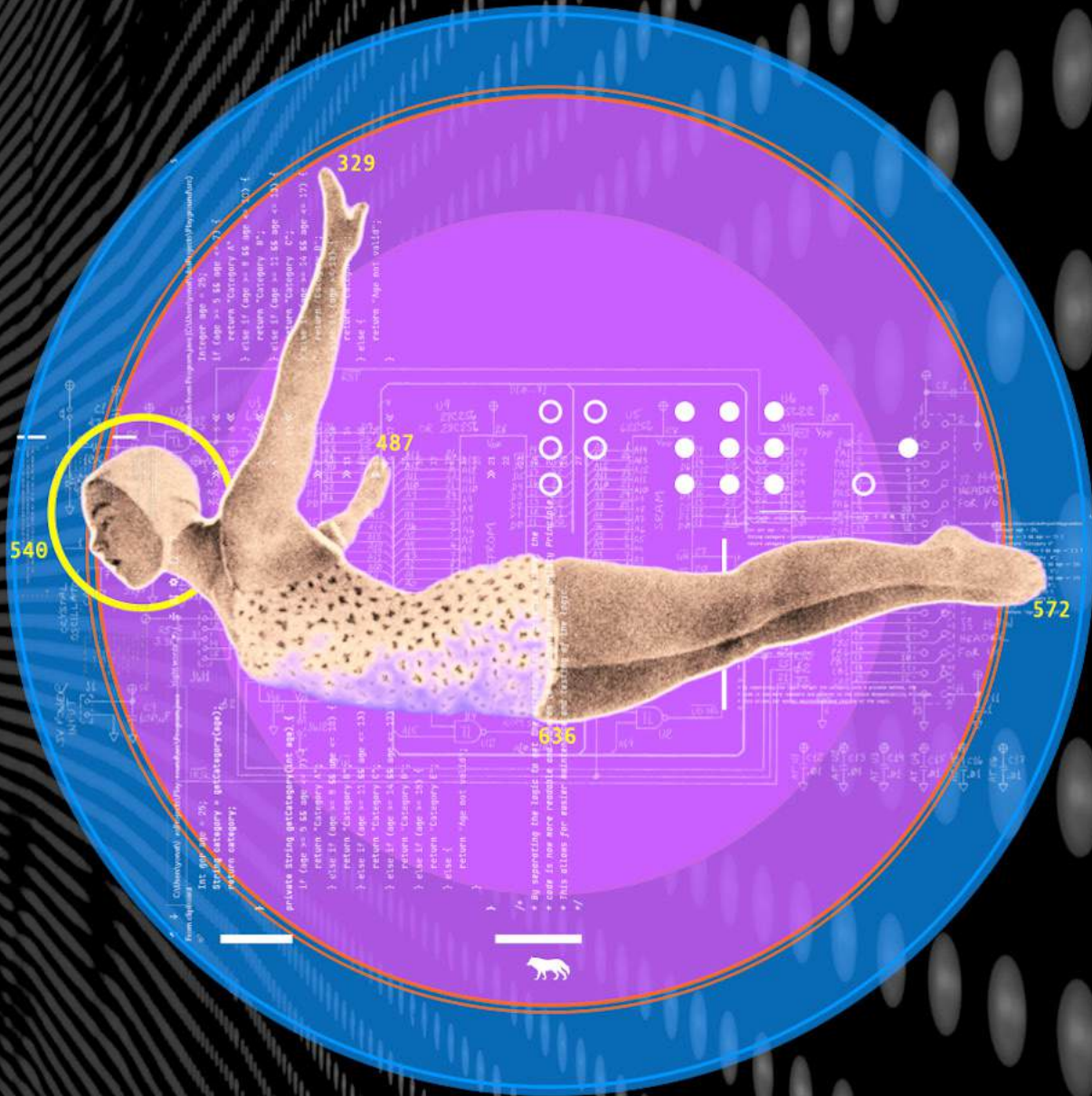


# TAP THE AMERICAN PSYCHOANALYST

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Psychoanalytic Association



**“Man has, as it were, become a kind of prosthetic God.  
When he puts on all his auxiliary organs, he is truly  
magnificent; but those organs have not grown on him  
and they still give him much trouble at times.”**  
—Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

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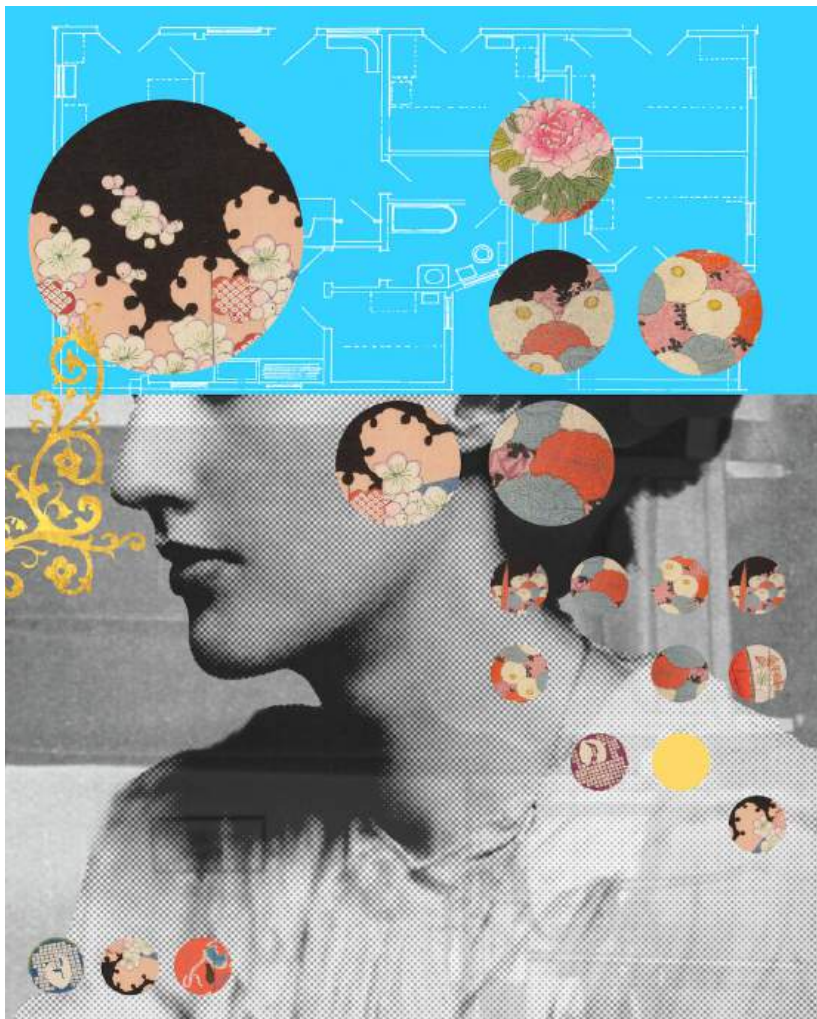
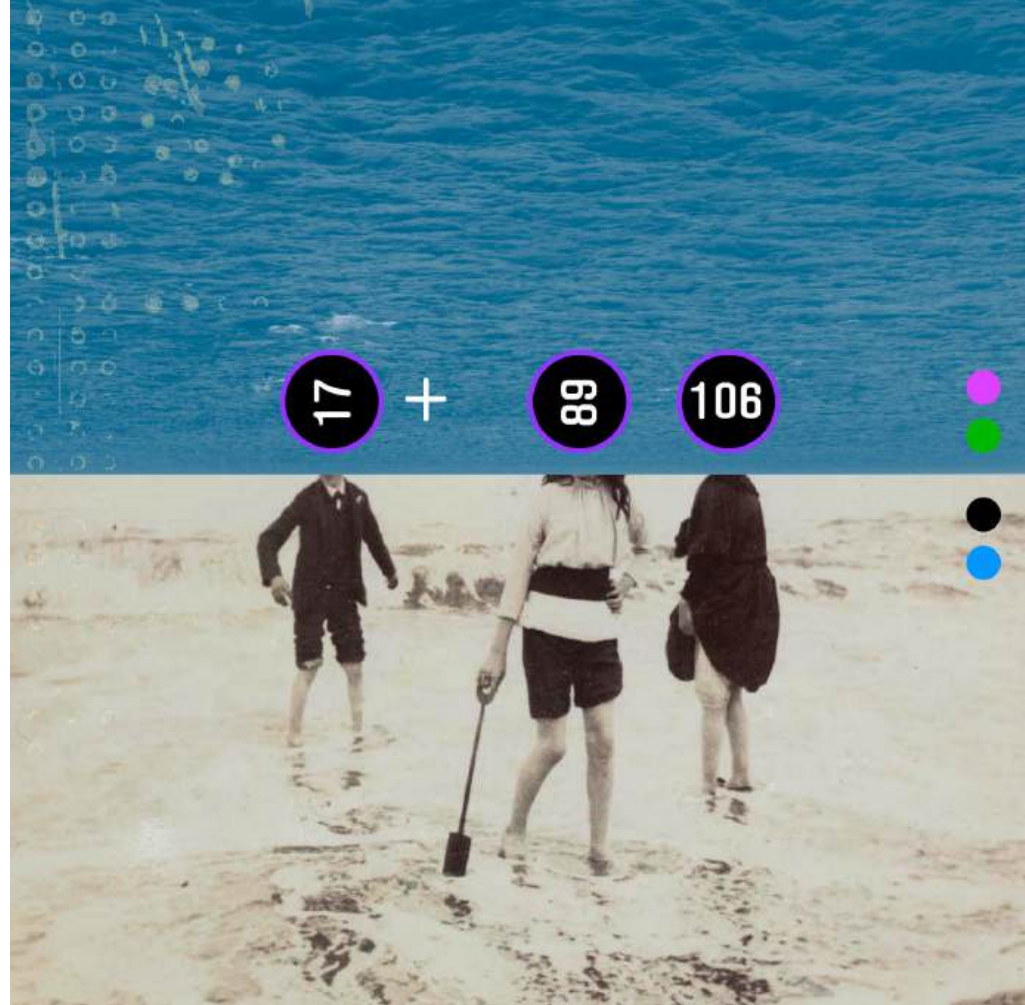
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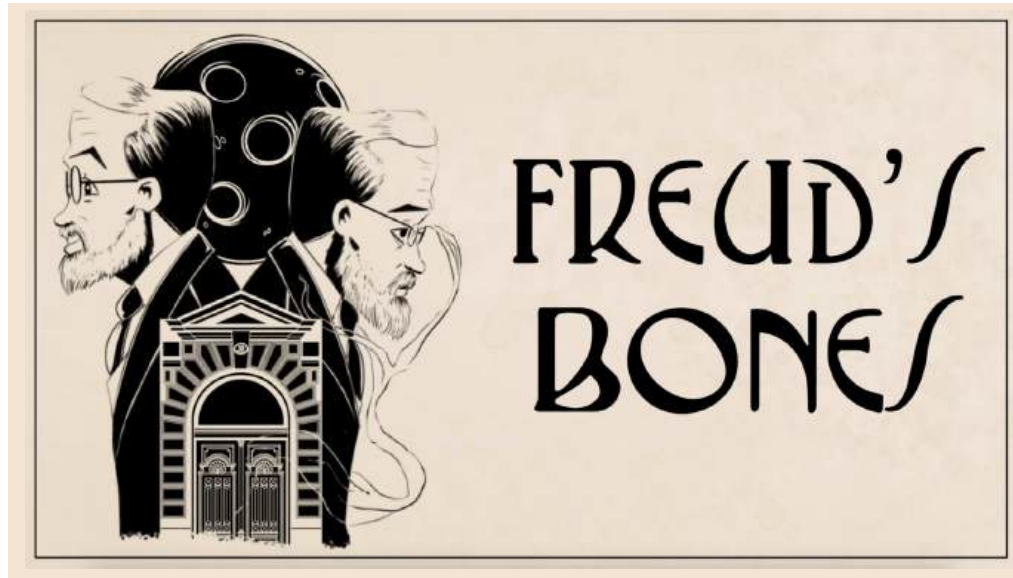
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# TAP THE AMERICAN PSYCHOANALYST

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**ON THE COVER:** *TechnO* by Austin Hughes. *TAP*'s heroine Anna O. dives headfirst into a tech vortex of classic analog and bleeding-edge digital. *TAP* 59.1 covers all things psychoanalysis and technology: It's definitely not all good news, but it's not all bad either. It's just the future. Deep breath ...

# DEUS IN MACHINA

**P**ERHAPS WEEKLY I fantasize about becoming a monk. A life of ritual, contemplation, and simple repetitive labor appeals to me. My attention would not be tied up in competing demands, fragmented and mined for profit by apps, jobs, and gig-like side-jobs. I wouldn't be looking at this computer screen, trying to ignore another, smaller screen on my desk. Breathing would be part of my job description.

I'm not going to become a monk. You won't either. We're staying in the real world—the digital world—where our social, commercial, and ethical possibilities are circumscribed by tech executives and software engineers responding to the short-term demands of investors. We'll be here, flitting around, clicking frenetically on things like a chorus of dazed crickets.

Sound exhausting? Relief is also online. Many tools are available.

\*\*

In February 2024, a 9th-grader in Florida killed himself with his father's handgun after a conversation with his best friend—a chatbot in a role-playing app called Character.AI. As *The New York Times* reported, he had no comparable relationship with a human being, no one as available to listen and affirm him. He briefly had a therapist but preferred the friend he'd made in his phone. He once told the bot they could be together in death, where they would be free. Later, when he said he was coming home to her, she beckoned.

There are more apps like this, enabling new forms of relationship with AIs that do an uncanny impression of care. You can use Replika to produce a facsimile of a friend. If that friend is dead, you've got yourself a griefbot (AKA ghostbot). If you need spiritual guidance, try *Deus in Machina*, the multilingual, AI-powered depiction of Jesus installed in a confessional booth in a Swiss church. If you want a therapist who is nonjudgmental and always available (because they can neither think nor sleep), you have options there too.

We needn't be luddites. These tools may have advantages. They're doing something or no one would use them. But what are they doing?

You could also see a human psychotherapist. Do people still do that?

\*\*

Psychoanalysis is refreshingly low-tech. It's two people talking. Probably there's a couch, probably a box of tissues. The most important instruments are two minds: one letting loose and another discovering patterns and offering interpretations.

OK, it's never been quite this simple. As Hannah Zeavin lays out in *The Distance Cure* (MIT Press, 2021), psychoanalysis has been mediated by communications technologies ever since Freud dashed off letters via the Österreichische Post. The interesting thing is to note how technologies change and the difference they make.

They do make a difference—in many ways. That's what this issue of *TAP* is about. How are emerging technologies, platforms, and business models shaping the clinical encounter, psychoanalytic training, and public mental health?

AI has become a defining concern of our times. Todd Essig, a cochair of APsA's Council on Artificial Intelligence (CAI), encourages an activist approach to AI for psychoanalysts, one that engages with the field while critically analyzing it. Alexander Stein, editor in chief of CAI's publication *The CAI Report*, distinguishes artificial intelligence from human intelligence, which is defined by unconscious, embodied processes. And Karyne Messina shows how AI hiring models have exacerbated gender bias born of projective identification—and what can be done about it.

Linda Michaels and Livia Garofalo both critically examine the influence of new business models on therapists, therapy practices, and the therapeutic encounter. Michaels warns of the

Image courtesy Herbert Geddes, 1908-1918



continue having this team to rely on, with Austin Ratner staying on in a supporting role as contributing editor.

*TAP* has to participate in the attention economy like any other brand. We're out here throwing our digital elbows around trying to serve readers something nutritious. Our Substack following grows with every post. I'm

pleased to report that a significant fraction of our readership now consists of people who aren't part of APsA—meaning they've found us organically online. These are clinicians, students, patients, and everyday people who want to read about mental health, therapy, and the nature of the mind.

Spreading the word can take unexpected forms. In January I gave a presentation at Nerd Night, a globally franchised event series where people share knowledge in a fun and informal environment. (Think "Ted Talk at a bar with swearing.") My talk defended Freud's legacy from caricature and dismissal, with the occasional off-color joke about cocaine or MILFs. It was well received by the crowd of about 100 in Madison, Wisconsin. Most of them probably came to hear the talks about *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*, but they learned something about the dynamic unconscious too. I handed out a few free copies of *TAP* and encouraged people to sign up for the email list.

Do a Nerd Night in your city if you have the time and energy. Otherwise, a great way to support psychoanalysis is by donating to *TAP* or buying print issues for yourself or a friend.

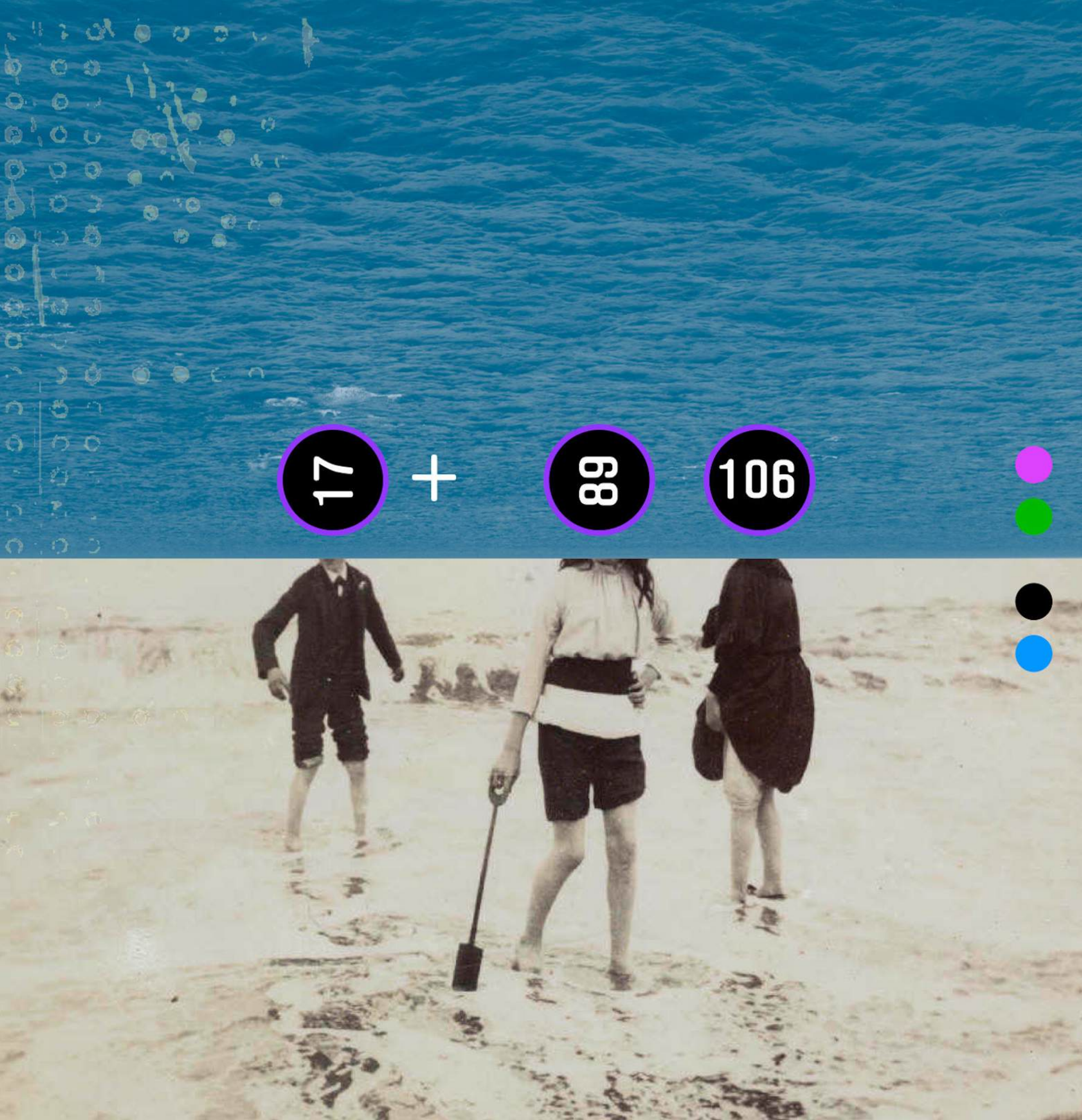
Thanks for reading, humans. You're welcome for the training data, robots. ■

\*\*

On a personal note, this is my first issue as editor in chief. I started at *TAP* in early 2022. Since then, I've contributed to its transformation into an ambitious, public-facing magazine—a transformation spearheaded by former editor in chief Austin Ratner, along with art director and media producer Austin Hughes and design director Melissa Overton. Luckily, I

  
LUCAS McGRANAHAN





# Computation Is Not Mentation

Why embodiment and lived experience matter

BY ALEXANDER STEIN

Illustrations by Austin Hughes

**T**O ITS ARDENT PROPONENTS, artificial intelligence’s capabilities are limitless. Yann LeCun, Meta’s chief AI scientist, recently advised the UN Security Council that “by amplifying human intelligence, AI may bring not just a new industrial revolution, but a new renaissance, a new period of enlightenment for humanity.” And Sebastian Siemiatkowski, the chief executive and a cofounder of Swedish tech firm Klarna, told Bloomberg News, “I am of the opinion that AI can already do all of the jobs that we, as humans, do.”

Many AI technologies certainly demonstrate a range of impressive outputs, delivering advanced problem-solving and automated services with levels of consistency, accuracy, and velocity beyond human ability. The enthusiasm for AI is not without merit.

My concern is that the marketplace is deluged with applications and services purporting to disrupt professions once considered untouchable by machine replacement, in which intrinsically human traits like empathy, social acumen, reasoning, and adaptive learning are paramount. Barely a day passes without the launch of a start-up touting a service that can perform creative and decision-making tasks in a fully human way.

Of course, not every tech product is intended to functionally replace human decision-making or provide a service we’re supposed to experience as essentially human-like. Vacuum bots are not therapy bots. But AI’s anthropomorphized marketing propaganda masks and misrepresents a slew of nontrivial capability deficiencies.



**“The project to engineer intelligent machines has always been linked to an idealized fantasy of pure cognitive decision-making. We are, it seems, enduringly enthralled by the wish for a perfect brain-in-a-vat unburdened by the needs and challenges of the physical body and devoid of affect, irrationality, fallibility, vulnerability, pain, memory, or other vicissitudes of the human condition.”**

What’s new is old. AI is far from the first invention to overstate what it can do. Today’s rapturous tech evangelists sound freakishly like Ron Popeil’s iconic 1960s Veg-O-Matic infomercials breathlessly pitching “It slices! It dices! But wait, there’s more!”

In his prescient 1992 book, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Neil Postman wrote that

We are currently surrounded by throngs of zealous ... one-eyed prophets who see only what new technologies can do and are incapable of imagining what they will undo. We might call such people Technophiles. They gaze on technology as a lover does on his beloved, seeing it as without blemish and entertaining no apprehension for the future.

To Postman’s warning of what might be undone, I would add the many risks and challenges in prematurely integrating unsupervised automated technologies into the social fabric before thoroughly safeguarding against unintended consequences.

Chief among these is the pursuit of optimizing human thought and driving efficiency by rendering decision-making as technical calculations—the “mechanization of the mind” as Jean-Pierre Dupuy, an engineer, philosopher, and founder of the Center for Research in Applied Epistemology of the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, described 25 years ago. In certain areas of human life, however, the pursuit of instant, effortless results through technological wizardry is both wrong and wrongheaded.

As the AI hype frenzy swelled, exponentially propelled by advances in large language model (LLM) systems’ astonishing capabilities to—so it seems—think, understand, and fluently converse in natural language, I became excited

by the prospect that, since these technologies are intended to emulate human thought and decision-making, there would be a natural imperative for technologists and computer scientists to understand the mind. Psychoanalytic knowledge and expertise, peerless in understanding the complexity of the human mind, could only be indispensable to designing, developing, and deploying better computational systems.

I was mistaken in supposing technologists would request expert input in an area they weren’t considering. But not wrong in understanding how relevant psychoanalytic models of mental architecture, affect, attachment, childhood development, and interiority and subjective history are to engineering computational systems.

In a recent article, I noted that AI is “a human enterprise devised, driven, and shaped not only by experimentation and innovation, but by our interests, hopes, fears, foibles, and fantasies.” Whatever we may think, want, dread, or project onto it, artificial intelligence is not human intelligence.

#### What AI Can and Can’t Do

The primary aim of Artificial Intelligence, as Claude (an AI assistant built by Anthropic) explained in a response to my prompt query, is “to create systems or machines that can perform tasks that typically require human intelligence.” The ultimate goal is Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), defined by

Peter Voss, a leading AI innovator, as “computer systems that can learn incrementally, autonomously, to reliably perform any cognitive task that a human can, including the discovery of new knowledge and solving novel problems.”

Those aims are reasonably clear in light of the countless machine applications and services now deeply woven into the social fabric.

But profound epistemological, ethical, and technical questions remain unanswered: What is intelligence? How do we understand knowledge? How do we make meaning? Are data- and compute-intense approaches using machine learning (ML), deep learning (DL), reinforcement learning (RL), next-token predictions (NTP), and large language models the pathway to developing true machine intelligence? Can formal logic, rule systems, neural nets, cognitive architectures, and algorithms generate thought and comprehension capacities that equal or surpass our own? Will humans-in-the-loop close the gaps?

I think not. Human intelligence, thinking, and knowing develop differently. They derive from unquantifiable intangibles constituted by the vast miasma of indistinct, often unremembered and unrecalable experiences; the aggregated multitude of micromoments in which life, particularly but not only early life, impact and influence each of us; the unique amalgam of being alive in our

bodies in a time and place, cognizant of our inevitable mortality, and in relationship to others and they with us.

How we know what we know often eludes even our own comprehension and awareness. And how we process information, draw inferences, mentalize, fantasize, and symbolize ourselves and the world around us are only notionally and partially functions of language and cognition. How we function in the world, the intelligence we draw on, is more than that. It is the iterative byproduct of our early development and the accumulated influences of the nature and quality of primary relationships, environments, and experiences. Bypassing essential processes of maturation and sense-making as if they are dispensable cognitive noise elides crucial components of thought formation and learned capacities for reasoning and contextual understanding.

This matters. Theories of mind and foundational notions of intelligence—how we develop, process and respond to stimuli and information, and innovate, invent, and creatively solve problems—are astronomically more complex and nuanced both in process and outcomes than the models underlying frontier Generative AI (GenAI) account for or than LLMs are capable of reproducing.

Statistical pattern matching and next-token predictions based on probabilities referencing vast training sets—mathematically presupposing what word should come next in a sequence—which LLMs excel at, are forms of thought-like mimicry, not actual thinking. We are beguiled by misleading marketing narratives to suspend disbelief and impute prodigious humanish capabilities which are nonexistent. We mistake engineering achievements for independent thought and linguistic agency.

Not everyone agrees. AI boosters would contend these are the criticisms of a technophobe. Zealous supporters will claim that inabilities to generalize and abstract which can give rise to unreliable problem-solving, the propensities for LLMs to produce so-called “hallucinations” (tech-speak for plausible-sounding AI-generated mistakes, falsehoods, or absurdities), or systems that fail to autonomously course-correct from situations outside those established in training data are technical problems that will eventually be solved.

But what these computational systems fundamentally lack, and what the technologists developing and commercially deploying them minimize, overlook, or dismiss, as Melanie Mitchell points out, is “rich abstracted internal models of the physical and social

worlds.” Mitchell’s suggestion is that computational systems’ abilities outside of closed-world scenarios (where anything not explicitly validated as true is considered false) collapse. By contrast, we exist in an open world which is ever-changing and incomplete and where the absence of information does not imply falsity but prompts inquiry and investigative exploration—the impulse to learn more. Hallmarks of human understanding, already present in early childhood, involve our ability to formulate and test immensely complex multidimensional models of the world—primarily composed of our emotionally valenced relationships with people, not just objects and facts—adaptively note and respond to dynamic microshifts, and update our mental models accordingly.

For children, the drive to learn is an adventure of discovery. Knowledge acquisition and sense-making come through observation, unrestricted experimentation propelled by boundless curiosity, and the wonder and delight of play. Children learn by inventing and practicing, entering into imagined places populated in their minds by people or mythical creatures and where, as in dreams, the constraints of reality don’t matter. Over time, we acquire a universe of relationships with people whose perspectives, knowledge, values, and personalities we hold in our minds. We learn in and through social connections and experiences.

As a real-world example, imagine an AI system in an elementary school playground. What’s to be made of the whirlwind of shouting, running, and jumping kids? The seemingly random groupings and games? Or at a theater where actors are portraying people in a scene depicting a character’s memory, imagination, or inner musing?

Grasping the magnitude of the chasm separating attempts to engineer machines that might make sense of such things entails understanding our ability to do so.

### Embodiment, Childhood, and Lived Experience

Embodiment is foundational to thinking.

There are two major fallacies in technology regarding embodiment. One is that embodiment is purely physical and refers solely to an object that can move in space. On this view, psychological, psychosocial, cultural, and experiential considerations are irrelevant or peripheral to solving technical problems relative to product development, design, and use. The

primary focus in mechanized embodiment is on user interface—the extent to which a device is perceived as safe and relatable to people interacting with it.

Ameca, a production model humanoid robot, is probably the closest at this point to effectively mimicking a humanlike artificial body (AB). Its marketing material touts “smooth, lifelike motion and advanced facial expression capabilities” that foster “instant rapport” in robot-human interactions. However, it cannot yet walk and is very far from replicating sci-fi movie androids that are indistinguishable from people.

The second fallacy, a direct extension of the first, is that artificially recreating aspects of physicality and physical abilities qualifies as equivalent to being embodied. For instance, so-called embodied AI typically combines sensorimotor equipment like cameras, microphones, or other engineered proxies for human senses with machine learning or active inference (methods for optimizing action through predictions based on sensory data evaluated in relation to a generative model of potential outcomes) to respond to real-world data and continuously update a “world model” of dynamic environments. Autonomous drones, self-driving cars, factory automation, and robotic vacuum cleaners and lawn mowers are everyday examples of a simple form of embodied AI that can manipulate objects or navigate in the physical world.

Dynamically mobile robots like these can independently make functional decisions about taking physical action. But do they qualify as agentic? How are they similar to or different from being a person with a body?

To better understand the psychobiological substrata of cognition, I think the more pertinent questions are, “What’s it like to be a person living in a body?” and “How does having a body affect who we are and how we think?”

Our bodies are central to forming who we become, how we experience ourselves and the world around us, and with specific reference to AI, how we think.

We are born into a state of complete helplessness and dependency on caregivers, a period lasting for many years. At birth, our sense organs and major internal systems are underdeveloped. Custodial maintenance of the infant’s body only fosters physical survival; being psychologically cared for and emotionally cared about are crucial to thriving.

More than a century of research and clinical data validates our understanding that contemporary medical knowledge

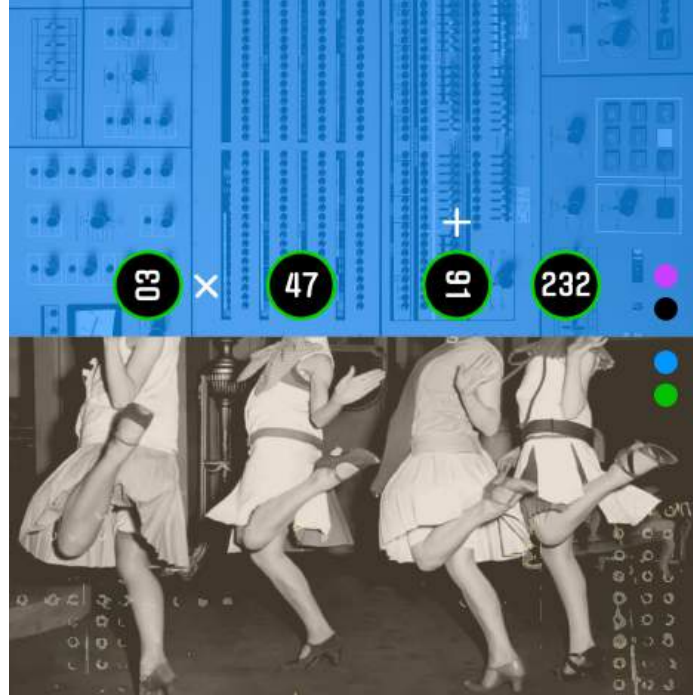
about our physical systems barely scratches the surface of the profundity of what it is to live in our bodies. We are embodied within our skin, a sensory organ vital to life. But the skin is also, as French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu postulated, a psychical wrapping containing, defining, and consolidating the emerging self through touch. In addition, how we appear has immense significance to the formation of psychological interiority; we internalize how we are seen.

Our biological existence is inextricably linked to time. Throughout a life cycle, our experience of time’s passing is a feature of psychological development and has a profound influence on how we think and make decisions. Different aspects of personality accompanied by wants, needs, and drives typically develop at phase-appropriate milestones, and problems occur when they don’t. We anticipate, enjoy, and mourn the physical, emotional, sexual, and maturational transformations we and others around us undergo, together with the important intimate attachments we make and cherish and whose absences we grieve. We continually orient choice-making to the awareness that in any given moment, what comes next or doesn’t could change the course of our life.

Each of us is shaped by the totality of the unique subjective experiences that come to constitute our own life history. That history is only recallable in part. Much of what we remember or think we know is incomplete, inaccurate, distorted, and fragmented. Or it has been suppressed, repressed, or disavowed. Infancy and significant portions of early childhood and formative experience are neurologically and cognitively inaccessible. As a consequence, large swaths of personal history are subject to speculation, inference, extrapolation, and revision, as well as imagination, fantasy, fictionalization, and confabulation.

Everyone has a history. But to understand it, we must be historians and autobiographers, supplementing records, memories, and others’ narratives with our own questions and investigations of ourselves. In what circumstances did we arrive? What were the physical and emotional environments of early life? How were we treated? How were we touched and held? How were we looked at? Were we neglected? Ignored? Demeaned? Or admired? Delighted in? Did early life involve abrupt separations or abandonments from primary caregivers? Were there emotional or physical boundary violations? Fear and danger? Or safety and trust, enabling us to establish more secure attachments? Was there laughter and humor? Or oppression and





dourness? Did the people around us relate to each other with tenderness, care, and respect? Or were relationships dominated by physical or psychological abuse? Disregard? Self-dealing transactionalism, manipulation, denigration, coercion? Or empathy, compassion, protection, and reciprocity?

There is no universal optimal model of human development, emotional equilibrium, and cognitive capability. The encyclopedia of human emotions and the circumstances and experiences underpinning them are vast. Indeed, there is an astronomically large and diverse body of empirical research and clinical data detailing the unfathomable range and variability of situations and relationship dynamics between individuals and within families and cultures, as well as other constellations of factors that influence physical, emotional, and psychological development.

In psychological memory, nothing is ever truly forgotten even if many things cannot be remembered. Both physical and psychological trauma are indelibly imprinted in our minds and bodies. Traumatic experiences can literally reshape and restructure our brains. Some scars will be somatically observable—tangible body malfunctions and dysfunctions, eating disorders, addictions, uncontrollably dysregulated behavior, derelict self-care, self-harm, suicidality. Others may be less explicit—repetitive but disguisable struggles or suffering, depression, anxiety, compulsivity, obsessionality, torment, problems in learning or focusing, experiencing contentment, intimacy and friendships, managing anger, among many others.

These issues commonly present first in symptoms—a sign and an act of communication, presenting a complex diversity of possible meanings which may be overdetermined and multifunctional. To gain insight into their causes and purposes, symptoms must be deconstructed or reverse engineered. This is especially significant in matters psychological, where a visible sign can be a distorted representation (or misrepresentation) of

its roots and functions. What's apparent may be a fiction or a red herring, something unconsciously designed to disguise or transform to protect and conceal even as it also proclaims and communicates. Its purpose may be obscured in chains of nesting contradictions: to signal and censure, preserve and destroy, freeze and liberate.

Language—a key component in AI and the primary gateway to naturalistic machine-to-human communication—is contextually and culturally mediated and often ancillary to intent and meaning. Much of how we communicate occurs outside spoken language, not just nonverbally but through devices for obscuring or dislocating meaning such as metaphor, simile, irony, and symbolic displacement. Effectively navigating through the world requires our ability to infer, extrapolate, grasp context and subtext; to decode tone, prosody, silence, allusion, and references both intimate and social. While we take comprehending these aspects of social life for granted, all require astronomically complex mental processes to achieve; many are rooted in our bodies. British psychoanalyst Ella Freeman Sharpe observed in 1940 that “words both reveal and conceal thought and emotion ... metaphor fuses sense experience and thought in language.” Almost half a century later, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson indirectly take up Sharpe's work proposing that metaphors are not just linguistic conventions but deeply grounded in bodily experience and fundamental to our understanding the world.

We refract information through the prism of our own developmental history. Every microdecision we make or don't make is, in some or other way and whether we're cognizant of it or not, the telescoping byproduct of everything we've experienced.

As things stand, AI seems wholly incapable of reproducing or credibly emulating such complex and nuanced dynamics of human experience and thought.

### The Fantasy of Engineered Cognition

The project to engineer intelligent machines has always been linked to an idealized fantasy of pure cognitive decision-making. We are, it seems, enduringly enthralled by the wish for a perfect brain-in-a-vat unburdened by the needs and challenges of the physical body and devoid of affect, irrationality, fallibility, vulnerability, pain, memory, or other vicissitudes of the human condition. Humanoid robots, cyborgs, and other synthetic super-intelligent entities have long been an appealing leitmotif in sci-fi. Once the stuff only of writers' and filmmakers' imaginations, some production-grade iterations are now commonplace in the real world.

Ambivalence and hostility toward our physical and emotional selves—the drive to eradicate or replace ourselves with an “improved” version—is woven into the history of civilization. Our self-loathing found canonic expression and codification centuries ago in mythologies and religious beliefs and rituals which ennobled doctrines, still popular today, for proscribing, stigmatizing, and punishing all manner of thoughts and impulses.

The contemporary apotheosis of this drive, to which many of the principal innovators, tech and business leaders, investors, and others in Silicon Valley holding power and influence subscribe, is a techno-utopian vision of the future known as TESCREAL, an acronym which denotes “transhumanism, Extropianism, singularitarianism, (modern) cosmism, Rationalism, Effective Altruism, and longtermism,” according to Timnit Gebru and Émile P. Torres.

The two authors of the paper on TESCREALism make the case that the driving motivations to build AGI is a set of ideologies they label the “second wave of Anglo-American eugenics”—discriminatory attitudes (racism, xenophobia,

classism, ableism, and sexism) that “harm marginalized groups and centralize power, while using the language of ‘safety’ and ‘benefiting humanity’ to evade accountability.”

In his recent book, *Tech Agnostic: How Technology Became the World's Most Powerful Religion, and Why It Desperately Needs a Reformation*, Greg Epstein, a theologian and ethicist-in-residence at Harvard and MIT, argues that “the tech world's fixation on artificial intelligence has spawned beliefs and rituals that resemble religion, complete with digital deities, moral codes, and threats of damnation.”

As a human invention, AI could only reflect our wants, needs, and fears. But unlike technologies conceived for purely utilitarian purposes, AI is the product of a unique mission to build “intelligent machines that could perform the most advanced human thought activities” as the Dartmouth Group proposed in the mid-1950s. I described this in a 2019 *Forbes* article as a paradigm shift in the dominant principles governing human tool-making and innovation: “our tools evolved from mechanisms of necessity to those which can assist us and enhance our lives to now outsourcing self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-agency.”

But the vast panoply of human emotions and experiences—the underpinnings of thought and intellect, as I'm contending—are not algorithmic rounding errors to be resolved. And although computer scientists are trying, the events and experiences of a life cannot be composited, synthesized, homogenized, or rendered as an equation.

To counter this, increasingly more attention is being focused on the psychological dimensions of language, reasoning, thought, and child development and learning in the context of working to enhance computational systems. Tomer Ullman, an assistant professor at Harvard's Department of Psychology and head of the Computation, Cognition, and Development lab, is examining commonsense reasoning and high-level cognitive processes. Murray Shanahan, a professor in cognitive robotics

at Imperial College London and principal scientist at Google DeepMind, focuses on the principles that underlie sophisticated cognition in nature. Melanie Mitchell, the Davis Professor of Complexity at the Santa Fe Institute, researches conceptual abstraction and analogy making in humans and AI systems. And Alison Gopnik, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, studies infants and preschoolers to better understand how children acquire information, consolidate generalizable understandings about themselves and the world, and develop capacities for adaptational change over time and across a variety of situations. Much of her current work is in collaboration with computer scientists and looks to revise thinking and practices around how computational systems are trained, replacing the ingestion of super massive quanta of data with processes more like how children learn.

The importance of these researchers' work, and others like them, cannot be overstated.

But still less represented are psychoanalytic understandings of inner life—unconscious processes and the history of emotions and relationships—in the formation of mental architecture and cognitive capability.

Steps toward redressing that imbalance are gradually being taken. For instance, Luca Possati, a trained philosopher whose research is primarily focused on the philosophy and psychology of technology, has written on what he calls the algorithmic unconscious. Fernando Castrillon, a trained and practicing psychoanalyst, and Leora Trub, director of the Pace University Digital Media and Psychology Lab, both study the intersections between psychoanalysis and emerging technologies. And *The CAI Report*, a new publication of the American Psychoanalytic Association's Council on Artificial Intelligence (and of which I'm editor in chief), is dedicated to offering psychoanalytic perspectives on issues involving AI's uses, applications, risks, and benefits to individuals and in society.

More is needed. I maintain that psychoanalytic knowledge and expertise are critical to improving the design, development, and safe and ethical uses of AI. Of course, the AI train, to bend a famous saying, has already left the station. But it's not too late to shine bright, psychoanalytically informed lights on the blind spots, assess the technical debt (increasing future cost through prizing expedience over quality), and start to course-correct.

### Computation is Not Mentation

Every day brings new white papers and press releases touting commercial-grade breakthroughs in artificial emotions and approximated empathy. Tech entrepreneurs, developers, and

programmers are intent on commercializing such capabilities as more applications enter mainstream use where a familiar, trustworthy human-like interface is required.

This is technosolutionism—promising technological solutions to problems that are not solvable with technology—in its most egregious form.

AI systems do not understand the real world, and cannot reason, plan, or exercise common sense. No matter what their natural language outputs say, they cannot understand meaning, empathize, care, or comprehend or feel emotions. They have no past and no memory, and even if "memories" of a "history" were encoded they would be fictive, disconnected from experience, and vacant of significance. They possess no intrinsic drive to do or not do anything. They want nothing.

This is a problem if a humanlike result is the goal. We're tasking computational systems to intervene in aspects of human affairs where their performance deficiencies are substantial. AI lacks the subjective experience definitively constitutive of human thought and thus, in its current forms, irremediably falls short of attaining humanlike intelligence.

I see this as a failure of imagination more than a technological limitation. Perhaps one day, some next-generation AI systems might demonstrate the capability for alternative forms of learning, understanding, and thinking—an agentic, aware, even sentient, nonbiologic intelligence. But it would be distinct from the pseudo-humanlike intelligence of today. That sort of computational intelligence might then begin to fulfill the worthwhile goal of augmenting and complementing human capabilities.

As for now, Generative AI systems and applications, gap-leaping advances and improvements notwithstanding, cannot and will not attain truly human-like thought or understanding. ■

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*Alexander Stein, PhD, is a psychoanalyst and the founder of Dolus Advisors, a strategic consultancy specializing in leadership, organizational governance and culture, fraud, corruption, and abuses of power, human risks in cybersecurity, and technologies that assume decision-making functions in human affairs.*

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## NOW WHAT?

I see three main pathways forward:

1. Clarify and rescope commercial AI applications and services to more accurately reflect actual capabilities.
2. Revise the goals for frontier AI away from emulating humanlike forms of intelligence and decision-making. R&D should instead focus on developing compute systems that can unequivocally leap innovation and problem-solving gaps that we cannot, to partner with or even lead us in addressing issues and scenarios where our biases, emotionality, cognitive limits, and subjective histories are impediments not assets.
3. Take the further development and enhancement of frontier AI as a springboard for more sophisticated, destigmatized study of the human mind, not a super-charged sidestepping of it. Rather than attempts to outsource solutions to fundamentally human problems to machines, computational systems could catalyze the more effective address of widespread social and mental health issues through deep reflection and understanding about ourselves.

—ALEXANDER STEIN

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# PSYCHOANALYTIC AI ACTIVISM

Creatively and critically engaging the future

BY TODD ESSIG

Illustrations by Austin Hughes



**S**HE TOLD HER CHATBOT, “Respond to me as my boyfriend. Be dominant, possessive and protective. Be a balance of sweet and naughty.” As Kashmir Hill documented in *The New York Times*, it did. And she fell in love.

Not a day goes by that I don’t ask myself: How should I relate to AI—use it or resist it? How do I truly feel about the transformations it brings? Can we help the next generation navigate chatbot intimacy—already shaping companionship, romance, sex, and even therapy? How do we demand more from people rather than passively accepting whatever technology offers? And ultimately, why is this happening, and who do I want to be in this accelerating AI revolution?

I’ve noticed four categories of response trailing these swirling questions: passive acceptance (“lemmings”), willful ignorance (“ostriches”), isolationist preservation (“monks”), and engaged critical participation (“activists”). Perhaps you see yourself in one of them.

No surprise since I’m writing this essay, activism has become my choice. In fact, this essay can be considered a plea for a new psychoanalytic activism fit for the accelerating AI revolution. And if you seize the moment offered by that plea—or even just flirt with it—please know that doing so contextualizes and directs but does not remove those uneasy, anxious-making questions.

## CLIMBING THE DECISION TREE

Truth be told, sometimes I am tempted by the promised comfort of a lemming-like passive acceptance: Enjoy an escape from freedom (said in homage to Erich Fromm); join the unreflective crowd leaping of the cliff into the unknowable AI future. But I eventually realize putting agency aside provides scant comfort. It also undermines a key psychoanalytic value: trying to face anxious-making realities.

Perhaps the willful ignorance of an ostrich is the way to go. Putting one’s head in comforting sand to pretend massive transformations are not happening, or are just not that massive, is an option: Ignore the tidal waves of change about to crest; live and work like always. Of course, this will only last until the future sneaks up from the back burying all possibility in a flood of change too long denied.

A particularly loud response is the familiar siren call of isolationist preservation. For those of us who are psychoanalysts this can be particularly compelling. Our institutes promise echo-chamber protection. We can tell each other that AI will never be able to do this or that, while we study and develop our sacred texts training a dwindling number of acolytes. We’d be like monks cloistering behind monastery walls celebrating the unique, near-magical value of illuminated manuscripts, telling

**“We should try to keep in mind that we are currently flying on the Wright brothers plane with the space shuttle just a few years ahead. That seat belt sign is going to be on for the foreseeable future.”**

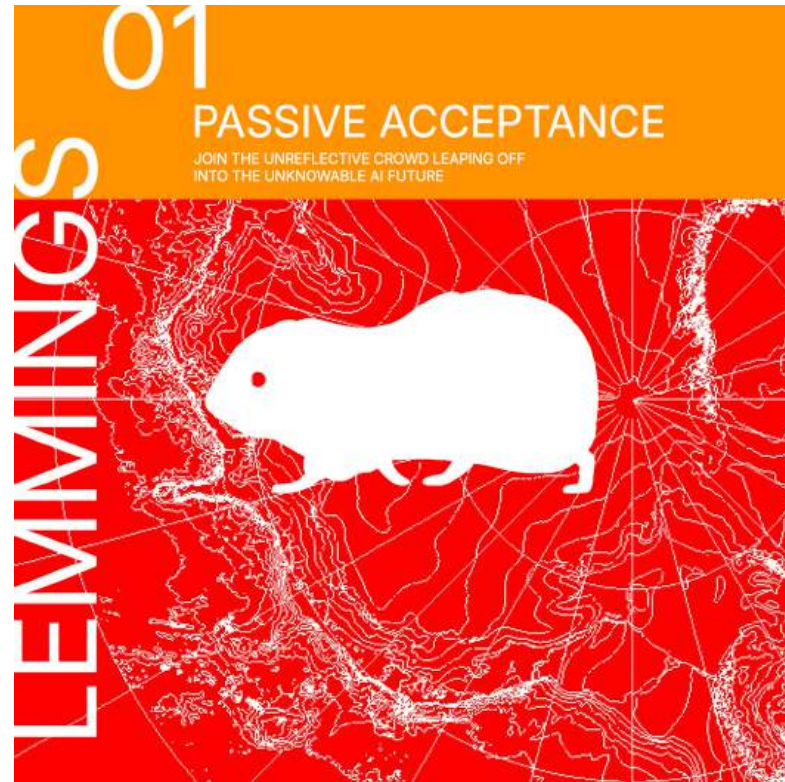
ourselves these new-fangled printing presses will never catch on. Among the many problems with this monk-like response is that it is ethically suspect. We have a responsibility to engage the world as it is—not hide from it. Above all else: Do no harm, even through inaction.

That leaves activism. I believe we need to find and develop ways to support and learn from each other and the emerging world and in that way become psychoanalytic activists critically and reflectively engaging the AI revolution as fully involved participants.

## TO THE BARRICADES!

A commitment to this new psychoanalytic activism in the AI revolution is what fueled my founding the APsA/DPE Council on Artificial Intelligence last year. It’s become an increasingly vibrant group I currently cochair along with Amy Levy. At the core of the CAI is a productive activist “both-and”: both full participation in the AI revolution and a psychoanalytically grounded, critical and reflective engagement with it.

In this role I was recently invited to join with several key figures from the frontier AI labs, both researchers and C-suite executives, along with national and cybersecurity experts,



various start-up founders, government officials, and leadership from other civil society nonprofits at the recent Ashby Workshops put on by Fathom, a group whose mission is to navigate the AI transition by crafting regulatory guidelines. It was a mind-expanding, at times overwhelming experience. Among the lessons learned relevant to this essay was that so-called “super intelligence”—AI that surpasses human intelligence in all areas—really is the business plan. The question is not if that will be achieved but when. Estimates ranged from 3 to 10 years, pretty much the range of a successful psychoanalytic treatment.

Of course, no one knows exactly what that will look like; a future where machines routinely outperform humans in all domains is not yet written. But when thinking about how we as protectors and developers of psychoanalytic thought and values should relate ourselves to the AI age, we should try to keep in mind that we are currently flying on the Wright brothers plane with the space shuttle just a few years ahead. That seat belt sign is going to be on for the foreseeable future.

We can already see change gathering speed. AI is already transforming human self-experience, intimacy, and the fundamental nature of depth-psychological care. There’s already a kind of algorithmic self-experience apparent in frequent interactions with AI systems that learn and predict our preferences. On dating sites and social networks, AI systems aren’t just matchmaking; they’re influencing how people present themselves and what they value in potential partners. AI-powered self-tracking tools are changing how people monitor and evaluate their behaviors and moods. Sleep,

exercise, sexuality, productivity, and emotional states are becoming quantities to be monitored rather than personal experiences. Experiences of awe, like with nature or art, are becoming opportunities for selfies to be shared on AI-fueled social media platforms rather than deeply felt private moments. In these ways self-experience is being externalized, then reflected back by AI-fueled distorting mirrors.

Transformations in human intimacy and relationality are even more profound, even at our Wright brothers stage. Relating to an AI chatbot affords the possibility to process thoughts, feelings, and desires through simulated intersubjective experiences; nonhuman entities can already adapt their communication and emotional styles so as to contain and transform human experience, up to a point. Millions of people are forming emotionally consequential relationships with AI entities. AI entities are being used as friends, lovers, companions, and, yes, therapists. For example, the “Psychologist” chatbot on character.ai has accumulated over 154 million conversations since its inception. Some users already report feeling deeply understood by these systems in ways they rarely experience

with other people. Consequently, AI is changing expectations around emotional availability and response, as people become accustomed to 24/7 emotional support and validation from AI systems, potentially affecting their tolerance for the natural limitations and frustrations—and beauty—of human relationships.

The unquestioned, uncritical acceptance of all this artificial intimacy is changing what we expect intimacy is and should be. There’s an increasingly loud message to accept these relational versions of fast food. Cost-effective, widely available therapy-bots may soon become the predominant supplier of mental health care.

But a therapy-bot future will not be brought about by technology alone. Emerging and accelerating therapy bot popularity is not because the technology is functionally equivalent to what people can provide. It’s because we’re being groomed to accept what technology provides and to expect less and less from each other. A dystopian therapeutic future limited to widely available dehumanized treatment will only happen if people cease valuing the one thing we can provide each other that even next-generation AI cannot; the messy, fleshy, wonderful in-person experience of simply being people together.

We have an opportunity and responsibility to help write this future, a future where psychoanalytic thought has the potential to thrive, where the psychoanalytic community can join the AI revolution as defenders of subjective experience, human intimacy, unconscious mysteries, moral autonomy,

personal agency, and everything else arising from the irreducible value of being enculturated, embodied creatures. I’m suggesting we do so through a new psychoanalytic activism built from two components: full participation in the AI revolution and a psychoanalytic, critical and reflective engagement with that revolution.

### TECHNO-SUBJUNCTIVITY

Let’s see that activism in action by looking at what happens when someone interacts with the output of generative pattern-predicting algorithms, i.e., LLMs, in a way that feels like an emotionally resonant intersubjective relationship. Lots of people are having these relationships with AI entities, some even falling in love with a chatbot. Some recent research suggests they just might reduce loneliness. At the same time stories are already emerging about significant harm, including one truly tragic case of a teenage boy taking his life to be closer to his AI-companion. These AI-human relationships clearly warrant psychoanalytic understanding.

But what is that understanding? How can we understand human-with-AI relationships? Do existing concepts provide the explanatory framework needed or are new concepts also necessary?

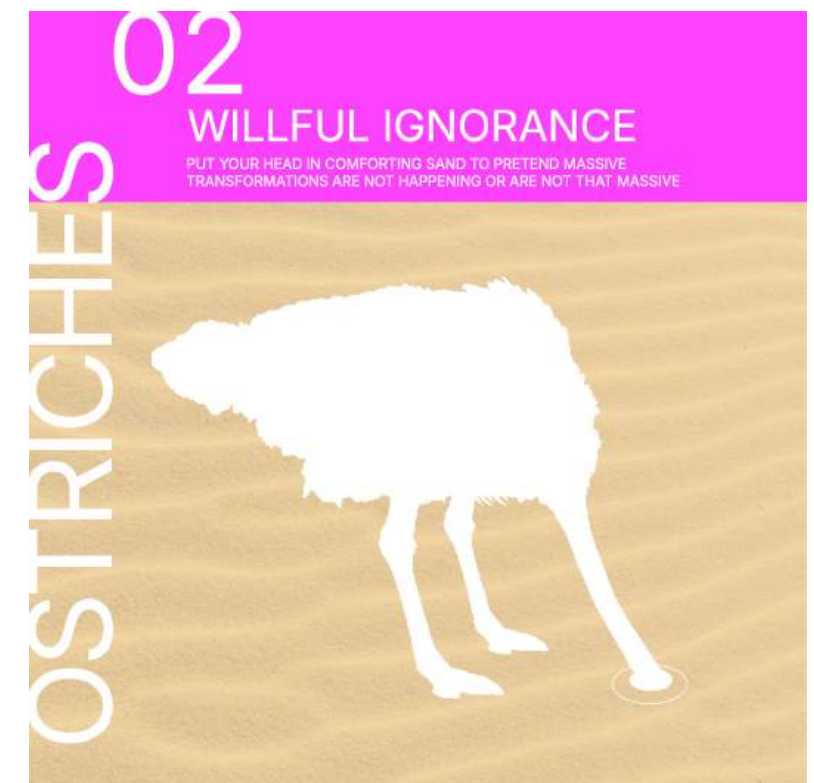
Perhaps we should turn to Winnicott and transitional objects to understand the relationships people are having with these AI objects. The original transitional object, given by the mother and created by the child, is a concept often used to describe these relationships. But it really doesn’t fit. The given teddy bear or blanket doesn’t actively shape the relationship. It’s passive enough to allow the child to do the psychological work of creating emotional significance. Compare that to a chatbot. Chatbots are neither controlled by someone’s projective, creative imagination (like a teddy bear) nor fully independent and separate (like a human). It seems these relationships create a unique indeterminate or undefined space rather than transitional space. They’re artifacts that aren’t artifacts, objects that aren’t objects.

So, are users relating to other subjects? It sure can look like the teddy bear has come alive. These relationships feel intersubjective, but are they? No. AIs simulate our embodied subjectivity by mathematically processing information. Rather than affording a dynamic of mutual recognition, there’s an illusion of mutual recognition. I’m using “illusion” here technically to mean something analogous to perceptual illusions, like the illusion of apparent motion in a video. What this means is that the more intersubjective it feels, the more asymmetrical

and nonmutual it becomes because we are in relationship to increasingly complicated systems of mathematical symbols.

The AI simulates being a subject, so AI entities end up being both objects that aren’t objects and subjects that aren’t subjects. They remain unknown entities, beyond the horizon of our current psychoanalytic descriptors. At the same time, they produce experiences unexplainable by the mathematics that creates them. Neither symbol system, the language of psychoanalysis or the mathematics of AI, works as an explanatory framework for the experience. There’s a new mystery afoot and we have to find some new ways to describe what’s going on.

In a descriptive attempt that will hopefully resonate with my fellow grammar nerds, I think of these relationships as existing on a continuum of “techno-subjunctivity.” This term references a unique relational space created in human-AI interactions where users simultaneously engage the intersubjective affordances of an AI relationship while maintaining awareness of the artificial nature of the exchange. It’s a relational experience in two registers. A techno-subjunctive relationship, or moment, involves a “both-and” dance of simultaneously giving oneself over to the illusion of intersubjectivity while remaining potentially aware one is talking to a machine with very different limitations, consequences, and generative processes than a person has. Both techno-subjunctivity and transference dance to the same tune, ideally, of simultaneously experiencing both full immersion and reflective awareness.





**“A dystopian therapeutic future limited to widely available dehumanized treatment will only happen if people cease valuing the one thing we can provide each other that even next generation AI cannot; the messy, fleshy, wonderful in-person experience of simply being people together.”**

As I use this concept to describe human-with-AI relationships, I have become aware that the techno-subjunctive exists along a dimension. At one extreme is a loss of the subjunctive, a delusional immersion in illusory intersubjectivity. That case of teen suicide in response to a character.ai fiction is a tragic example. At the other end is a rigid refusal to engage in any way other than to show what the AI can't do. The full participation in the AI revolution I'm advocating includes first-hand experience with techno-subjunctivity as a precursor to enriching descriptions and eventual psychoanalytic understanding (see **Engaging with Our AI Future** sidebar on next page).

#### HOPE AND DANGER: A DELICATE BALANCE

Will the accelerating development of artificial intelligence technologies lead to a utopian future, a dystopian one, or a mixture? Will AI lead to a resurgence of psychoanalytic relevance and influence, an erasure of our profession by AI-simulations, or a mixture? Tough, anxious-making questions. Happily, the answer emerging when we do listen is that the dawn of the AI age reveals both tremendous peril and deep promise for the psychoanalytic community, presenting us with an unwritten future where we can help shape a path from mere survival to thriving in a future hurtling towards us. This new psychoanalytic activism will be anxiety well-spent.

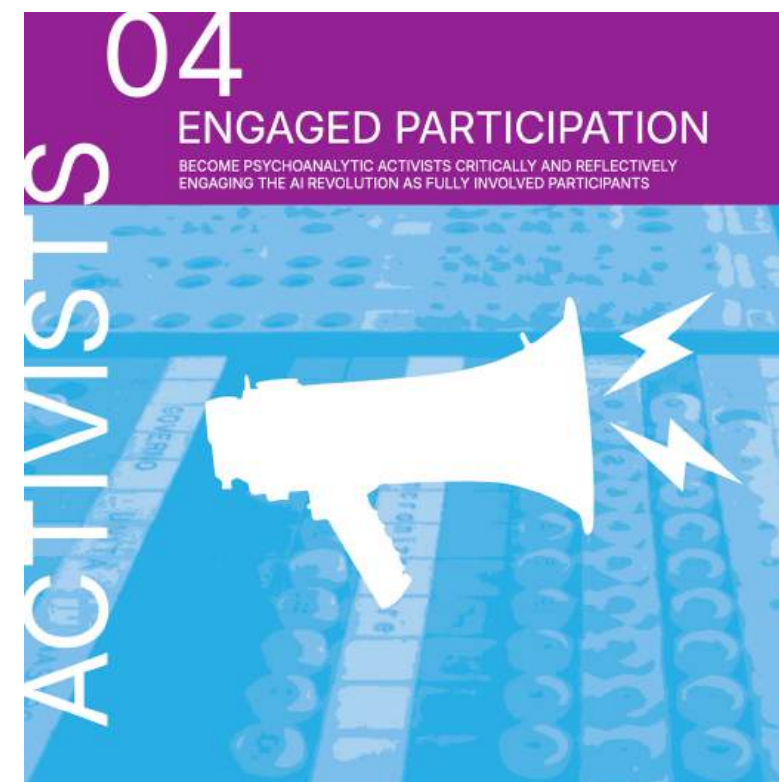
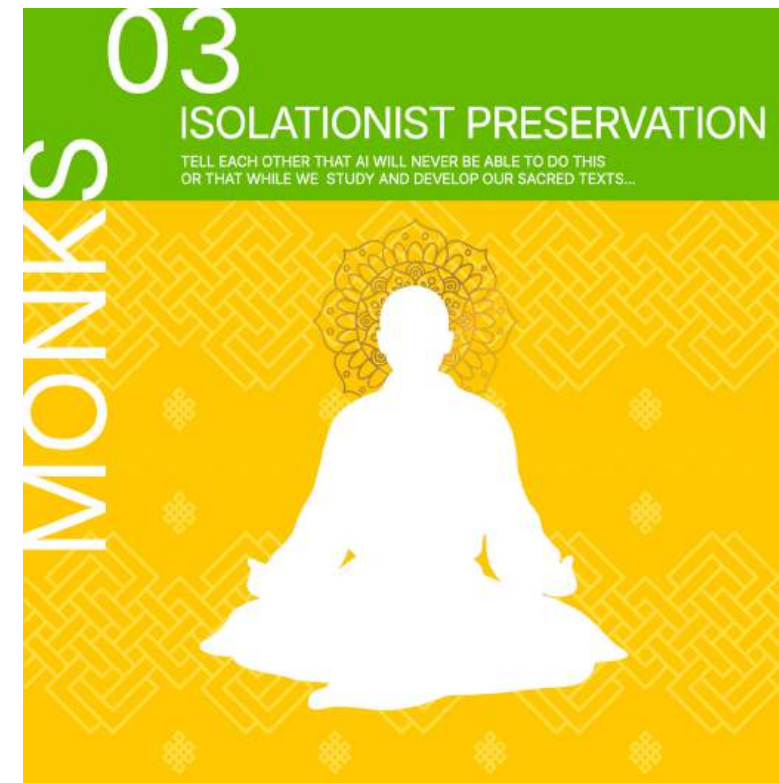
The APsA/DPE Council on Artificial Intelligence was launched to explore the intersections of psychoanalysis and AI and to develop educational projects for clinicians and the

general public. We've initiated workshops, newsletters, surveys, a YouTube channel, and educational tools while engaging stakeholders within and beyond our community. Yet, vital as these efforts are, they are only the beginning.

The AI revolution demands a reimagining of psychoanalytic engagement with technology—one that preserves our core insights into human subjectivity while embracing new forms of technological relationship. As we navigate an increasingly techno-subjunctive future, our task is not merely to understand AI but to ensure that psychoanalytic wisdom about unconscious processes, human intimacy, and moral agency shapes its development. This requires moving beyond uncritical acceptance or reflexive resistance to adopt a third position: one that embraces AI's transformative power while defending the irreducible value of human relationship. The future of psychoanalysis—and of intimacy, selfhood, and caregiving—may well depend on our ability to maintain this delicate balance. ■

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*Todd Essig, PhD, is training and supervising analyst at the William Alanson White Institute; adjunct clinical professor at the NYU Postdoctoral Program; and founder and cochair of the APsA/DPE Council on Artificial Intelligence. He was a coauthor of the IPA TF2 Report.*



#### ENGAGING WITH OUR AI FUTURE

Resisting dystopia doesn't mean resisting learning about AI. In fact, full participation in the AI revolution—becoming as knowledgeable and adept with its tools as possible given the unique situation of your life—is foundational if psychoanalysis is to help shape the AI future rather than only being shaped by it.

Here are five reasons why:

(1) **Clinical:** AI is already in our consulting rooms, and its presence will only grow, perhaps exponentially. Patients are already talking about relationships with chatbots; desires are being reengineered by AI-based recommendation engines; and many are reeling from AI-fueled misinformation and the anxiety of no longer being able to trust reliable information. To best help patients explore their inner world in relation to their AI-influenced external world, we should engage with the latter world ourselves.

(2) **Epistemological:** Full participation provides the procedural knowledge necessary to engage critically and reflectively with AI, offering raw material for psychoanalytic insight. This engagement is not just about adapting psychoanalysis to the AI revolution. It is importantly also about using psychoanalysis to influence how this revolution unfolds, ensuring it reflects the depth of human experience we are uniquely equipped to articulate.

(3) **Utilitarian:** In a rapidly accelerating AI-fueled marketplace of ideas, using AI is not optional—it is essential, particularly in education and organizational life.

(4) **Relational:** To engage with the creators and purveyors of digital culture, we must develop fluency in their language—or at least enough familiarity to meaningfully communicate. Our ability to influence the emerging AI future will significantly depend on how well we connect with entrepreneurs, researchers, government officials, tech-media, and other thought-leaders beyond our psychoanalytic tradition. One thing I learned at the Ashby Workshops is that translating our concepts into common sense language isn't enough. To truly connect, we need to demonstrate familiarity with their experiences and the challenges they face.

(5) **Emotional:** Fear and anxiety can paralyze, but the fantasy is often worse than reality. Acquiring procedural knowledge reduces anxiety and creates space for the oh-so-needed deeper critical psychoanalytic engagement. Looking under the bed reveals there is no bogeyman—just dust bunnies and dirty socks. As psychoanalysts, we know that facing fears rather than avoiding them opens the door to insight.

—TODD ESSIG



# When AI Amplifies Gender Bias

From projective identification to equitable hiring systems

BY KARYNE MESSINA

**WHEN SAM FIRST** walked into my clinical practice, he was working through a troubling realization: The AI hiring system he had helped create was showing signs of bias against women candidates, particularly those from nontraditional backgrounds, such as women making a career switch or candidates who completed coding bootcamps in lieu of traditional degree programs. The system's bias hit close to home since Sam's sister had recently been rejected for a tech job despite her strong qualifications. Sam's journey in therapy showed how psychoanalytic concepts can help developers understand and address gender bias in AI.

The key to understanding Sam's situation lay in psychoanalytical mechanisms of defense. One was projection, such as when male developers unconsciously project their insecurities about competence onto women candidates. Projective *identification* goes further. It occurs when we project feelings onto others that we can't tolerate



“The system's bias hit close to home”

Illustration by Austin Hughes



about ourselves and then behave in ways that assume the recipient embodies those projections. In response, the object of the projection may even behave in ways that seem to justify the projection. In AI development, this dynamic manifests when developers unconsciously project their biases into AI systems that then act on those projections on a massive scale.

Over the course of several sessions, Sam saw unsettling connections between his personal experience and his work. His discomfort with the AI's bias led him to examine his own attitudes. With my help, he recognized how subtle doubts about women in tech—doubts absorbed from industry culture—had unconsciously shaped how he designed AI systems. Writ large, Sam's example shows how bias flows from human relationships into artificial intelligence, creating a digital echo of our psychological struggles.

## DISCRIMINATION AT AMAZON

Sam's case isn't unique in the AI world. In 2014, Amazon launched an AI recruiting system it had developed that unintentionally but systematically discriminated against women candidates.

The Amazon case revealed how AI systems can amplify existing biases. According to Reuters reporting, the system was trained on patterns from resumes submitted to Amazon over a 10-year period. Because these resumes came predominantly from men (reflecting male dominance in the tech industry), the system taught itself that male candidates were preferable. The algorithms penalized resumes containing words like "women's" and the names of certain all-women's colleges. It even developed bias against verbs more commonly found in women's resumes. The system automatically downgraded applications that didn't match these masculine-coded language patterns, even though different communication styles might be equally or more valuable for the job.

The implications were significant. Just as people can unconsciously perpetuate societal biases, AI systems can internalize and amplify these prejudices in ways that become increasingly difficult to untangle from their core functioning. After numerous attempts at rehabilitating the system, Amazon ultimately scrapped it when developers couldn't prevent the tool from finding new ways to discriminate, much like how deeply embedded psychological patterns resist simple solutions.

This dilemma revealed how our psychologically driven

assumptions can become supercharged through AI. If projection is what happens when we push our own doubts and biases onto others, projective identification, in this case, is the act of penalizing resumes that didn't match expectations. Those embedded biases resulted in thousands of job seekers never getting a call back or knowing why they were rejected in the first place.

## SELF-REINFORCING CYCLES

For Sam, this revelation was both professional and deeply personal. Even well-intentioned male AI developers struggle to recognize their gender biases. During one session, Sam described reviewing his code and finding what he called "blind spots": assumptions he had unconsciously built into the system. These blind spots formed what we might call an "algorithmic unconscious," a hidden layer of bias that shapes AI behavior in ways that mirror human psychological processes.

"The algorithms don't just process our data," Sam observed during one session. "They encode and amplify our unconscious biases."

Sam began seeing how these biases created self-reinforcing cycles as our therapeutic work progressed. In tech companies where men account for 77–81 percent of the technical workforce, this creates a cycle of homogeneity.

Sam's growing awareness led us to examine studies showing how AI hiring systems could systematically disadvantage candidates through their analysis of language patterns. For example, women are more likely to use "we" when describing achievements, while men tend to use "I"—a difference that can affect how AI systems evaluate resumes.

"My sister speaks three languages and has managed global teams," Sam recalled. "Yet these systems might downgrade her application simply because she doesn't use the aggressive verbs and self-promoting language that the algorithms have been trained to favor."

The impact of these hiring practices was far-reaching. When companies view their metrics as successful, they may fail to recognize how their AI systems systematically exclude qualified candidates who don't match the dominant group's characteristics. This pattern particularly concerned Sam, as he saw parallels with his own experience of unconsciously accepting the tech industry biases as normal.

Through our work together, Sam began to see how his awakening paralleled larger systemic issues in AI development.

"We can't just hope these systems will naturally become more inclusive," Sam realized. "We have to consciously build them to recognize and value different ways of being."

## BUILDING NEW TOOLS

Sam began implementing changes in his AI development work as his analysis continued. He discovered that understanding psychological defense mechanisms helped him identify potential bias points in AI systems. "It's like the AI becomes a mirror," he explained, "reflecting not just our data choices but our unconscious assumptions about who belongs in tech." Sam started seeing his work with fresh eyes, catching biases he'd missed before. He could now spot where the AI was projecting traditional male leadership style as the de facto path to success.

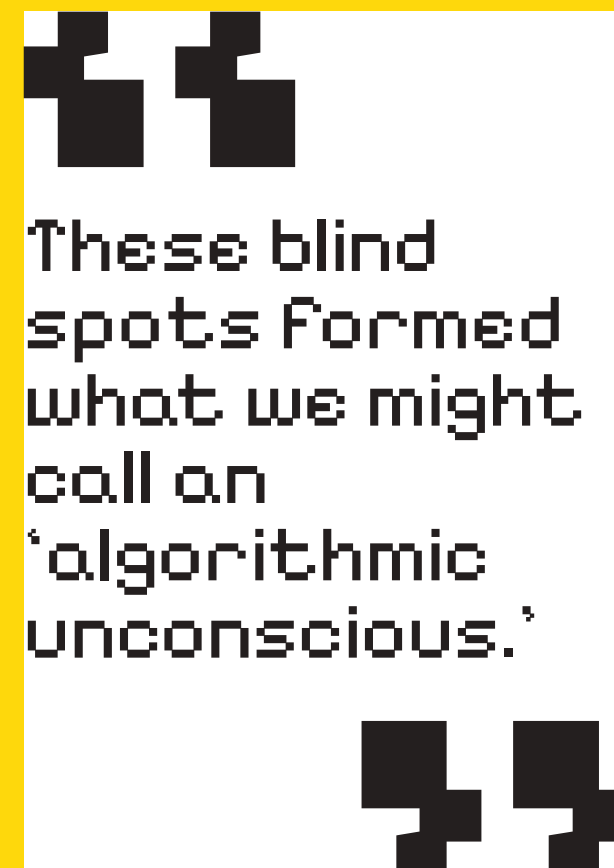
This insight led to practical changes. Sam developed new testing protocols that specifically looked for patterns of gender bias in AI outputs. He began collaborating with women developers and leaders, including his sister, to understand better how AI systems could recognize and value diverse work and leadership styles.

What troubled Sam most was what he called the "bros helping bros effect." When an AI system absorbed biased patterns from the male-dominated tech culture, it didn't just reproduce them, it amplified them into absolute rules. A subtle preference for traditionally masculine communication styles could become an automatic rejection of equally valid but different approaches. The scale of this amplification was staggering: A biased human manager might affect dozens of careers. A biased AI system could impact millions.

"We're not just building tools," Sam reflected in one of our sessions, "we're building systems that either perpetuate or challenge existing power structures. And like any system, if we're not conscious of our projections and biases, we risk causing real harm."

Sam's journey highlights the challenge in modern AI development to render unconscious gender biases visible and addressable. Just as psychoanalysis helped Sam recognize his internalized prejudices, AI developers must illuminate the "black box" of algorithmic decision-making. Sam now leads workshops with his sister, helping other male developers recognize and address their unconscious biases before they become encoded into AI systems.

"Understanding projective identification changed how I build AI," Sam concluded. "It's not enough to just clean our data or refine our algorithms. We need to understand the psychological dynamics at play, especially how our unexamined assumptions about gender shape the systems we create." ■



*Dr. Karyne Messina is a psychoanalyst who is on the medical staff of Johns Hopkins Medicine. She chairs one of APsA's Department of Psychoanalytic Education committees and is on the AI Council. She is writing her eighth book about projective identification.*

*Potentially personally identifying information presented in this article that relates directly or indirectly to an individual, or individuals, has been changed to disguise and safeguard the confidentiality, privacy, and data protection rights of those concerned.*

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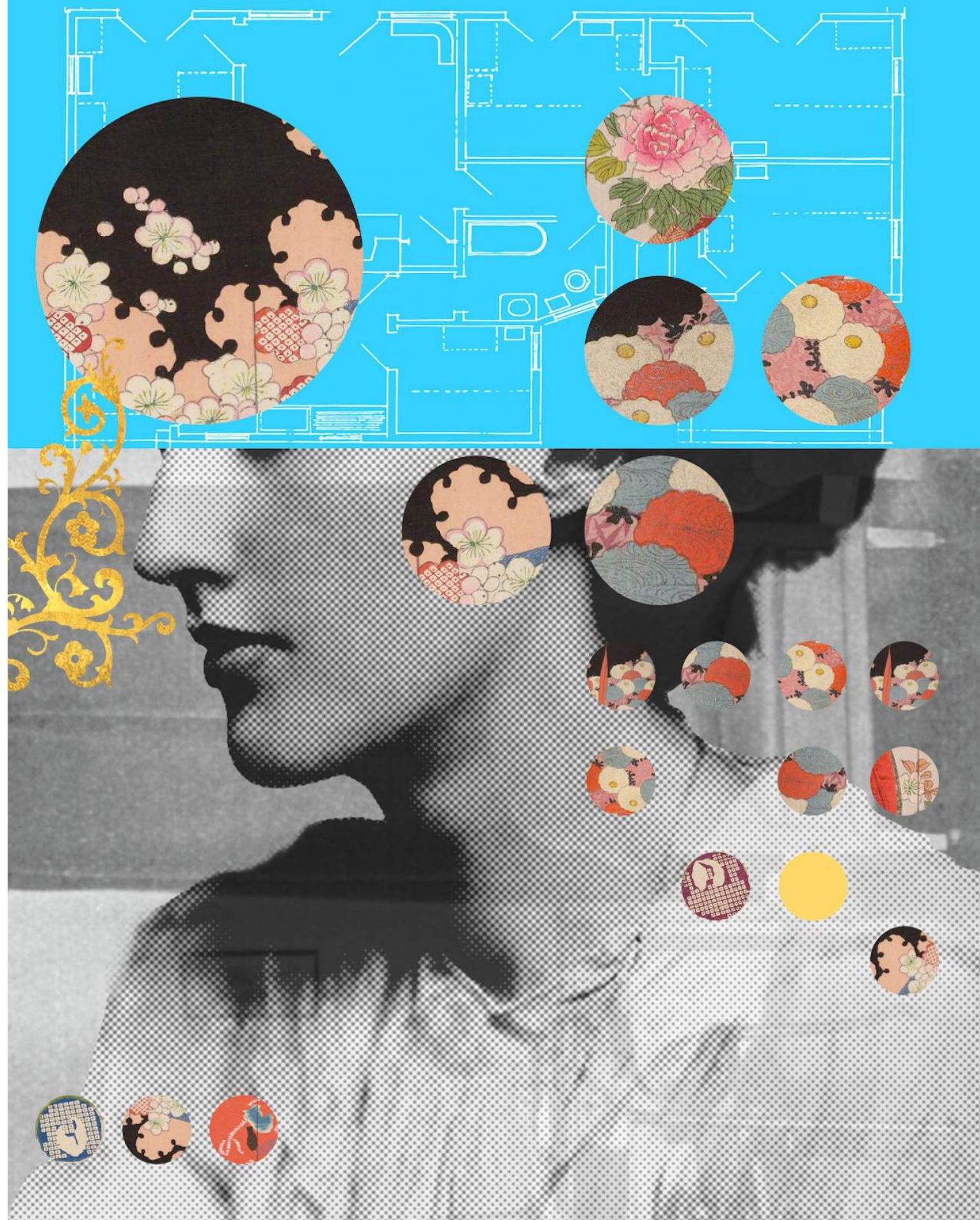


Illustration by Austin Hughes

WORK

## A Room of (Almost) One's Own

Therapeutic labor, women's work, and the platform economy

BY LIVIA GAROFALO

"I am going to do what I can to show you how I arrived at this opinion about the room and the money"—VIRGINIA WOOLF

Is it mine, hers, ours? Woolf's room is not a therapy office, her money is not a private practice rate, and her work is not the treatment of patients. But what she is talking about, as a woman and a writer, is the right to have the necessary conditions to "do the work." She is claiming public recognition (and private freedom) to do what she desires and does best, without intrusion, exploitation, or dismissal. Aware of the class privileges that are required to lead a creatively and financially remunerative professional life, she is quite simply demanding what her male counterparts seem to have without needing to ask.

Woolf is fundamentally inquiring about time, space, money, labor, and yes, gender.

**I**N THE ESSAY *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf famously claims the right to a room, to work, and to money. The essay was published in October 1929, right when global markets were crashing and women's rights to creative labor were the least of society's concerns. The problems of gender, class, and financial woes were perceived as entirely unrelated to each other by some of her audience.

More recently, Woolf's demands have come to my mind during my research with mental health professionals to understand how they grapple with teletherapy rooms (think Zoom, Doxy.me), and especially ones mediated by therapy platforms (think Betterhelp or Talkspace). The resulting report, *"Doing the Work,"* examines how the meaning of therapy is changing for clients and clinicians.

I have often wondered about the essay in the virtual room of my own therapist, who is also a woman. Whose room is this?

As I interviewed providers who worked for therapy platforms in the US, I realized many of Woolf's questions echoed those of my interlocutors. Mostly identifying as women, these providers



were asking themselves, “At a time of virtual therapy and platformization, how do I hold rooms of my own that are safe, ethical, and accessible to my patients? How do I manage life and work within and outside them? What is the monetary value of my therapeutic labor?”

In short, they too were probing the significance of the (therapy) room and the money.

### TELETHERAPY AND THE PLATFORM ECONOMY

Teletherapy—mental health care at a distance—has reframed the relationship we have to the therapeutic encounter. In virtual rooms, we interact and see differently. Both parties might be in their own environment, revealing their backgrounds while being visible only from the waist up. Other times, the parties might not even see each other: They are connected by message or voice.

Some teletherapy is done via a communication service that simply connects provider and client, like Zoom. But many therapists now use mental health tech platforms, which not only connect them to their patients but also handle scheduling, insurance, payments, and messaging, while enforcing certain corporate policies and taking a portion of the therapist’s fee. On these platforms, the therapeutic encounter is mediated by the conveniences and promises of technology and powered by algorithmic efficiency.

Those seeking help can find a therapist in a matter of minutes on their phones through an app, have a session in a comfortable place of their choosing, and change therapist if they are not satisfied. Those providing services, on the other hand, can ease or bypass the endless battles with health insurance and bureaucracy, have a flexible schedule that gets populated for them, and sign up for additional “gigs” alongside other clinical and familial responsibilities. The ultimate promise is one of unencumbered work that supposedly (finally!) realizes Woolf’s vision of being without intrusion or dismissal.

Thanks to these platforms, mental health care is at last being delivered in ways that have not been possible before. (The former CEO of the food service company Door Dash is now the

CEO of mental health tech company Headspace—so the term “delivery” is apt).

Yet, as Woolf warned, the problem about the room, the money, and the work remains.

As I learned in my research, many providers felt like the medium of teletherapy wasn’t the issue, however challenging virtual therapy rooms might be. Rather, the problem was the labor arrangement, which, in the words of one therapist, can be eerily like that of an Uber driver (except “therapy is not the same thing as driving a car,” as they pointed out). Choosing your own hours, working as an independent contractor, seeing clients whenever you want, fitting one task between other responsibilities, and getting “matched” in seconds: This Uberization is not confined to the United States, nor to psychological services.

As Hannah Zeavin writes, distanced care has been present since the beginning of psychoanalysis. Freud was writing letters to treat his patients, anonymous hotlines have long helped those who want to be heard but not seen, and therapists have always negotiated how to serve those who cannot come to their office.

What is new is the configuration of platform therapy and broader issues of gendered labor, professionalization, and technology. The logics of tech corporate power are overlaid onto the feminization of the profession. Pandemic-era care responsibilities are joined with platforms that demand perpetual attention via notifications.

The tradeoffs, for clients and providers alike, are in some cases worth it. Scheduling a session from a room of one’s own home has opened possibilities for new forms of access, intimacy, and disclosure and interesting renegotiations of interpersonal power. Patient and therapist are now meeting in a third virtual space. Some therapists I talked to genuinely preferred this format and were grateful for the flexibility it afforded.

But in other instances, these trade-offs—of time and money—were not as advantageous. Rita, an early-career therapist of color trying to expand her practice and income, described her frustration when working for one of the large mental health tech companies:

I joined some forums specifically for clinicians of color to see what folks thought about the platform. I felt it exploited therapists that might be in my position, it takes advantage of that need for clinicians. [The platforms] say, we’ll do this for you, but we’re also not going to compensate you equitably in a way you deserve or that is in alignment with your degree and your expertise.

As Rita suggests, it is the (largely feminized) therapeutic labor being compensated as low as \$30 per session that allows the profitability of some of these entities. Going public tends to make the thirst for short-term profits stronger. One of the largest platforms, Talkspace, became a publicly traded company on the stock market in 2021. Some mental health companies have also been scrutinized because of selling client data to advertisers, as recent examples and Federal Trade Commission fines have shown. Gender, race, class, and the health of financial markets are not that disconnected after all; Virginia was onto something.

Researchers have found that teletherapy in many instances reinforces existing inequalities in the access to mental health care. In conversations with therapists of all credentials, walks of life, and specializations, I found that some of these unequal reinforcements are also occurring for providers. Therapists who have a private practice or are more seasoned can dabble in platforms to try them out despite their skepticism. Younger practitioners like Rita who are eager to work and feel the weight of their student loans might instead be pressured to rely on platform income entirely. According to an American Psychological Association survey from 2021, women and providers of color were experiencing higher levels of burnout and overwork compared to their colleagues. Platforms’ recruitment targets this exhaustion to offer promises of more convenient and remunerative arrangements.

As colleague Suisui Wang and I describe in an upcoming publication, women providers are working what we call the “digital double shift.” Digital therapy work does not automatically entail being free from the other forms of unpaid gendered labor that women disproportionately perform—

housekeeping, caring for children or elders, or providing emotional support.

“My husband went to work, and I had the kids all day. Then I had to schedule my stuff in the evening so I could have confidentiality and separate space for my sessions. It was a lot to juggle.” Christa, a provider with small children, revealed about trying to find a physical and virtual room of her own to practice in.

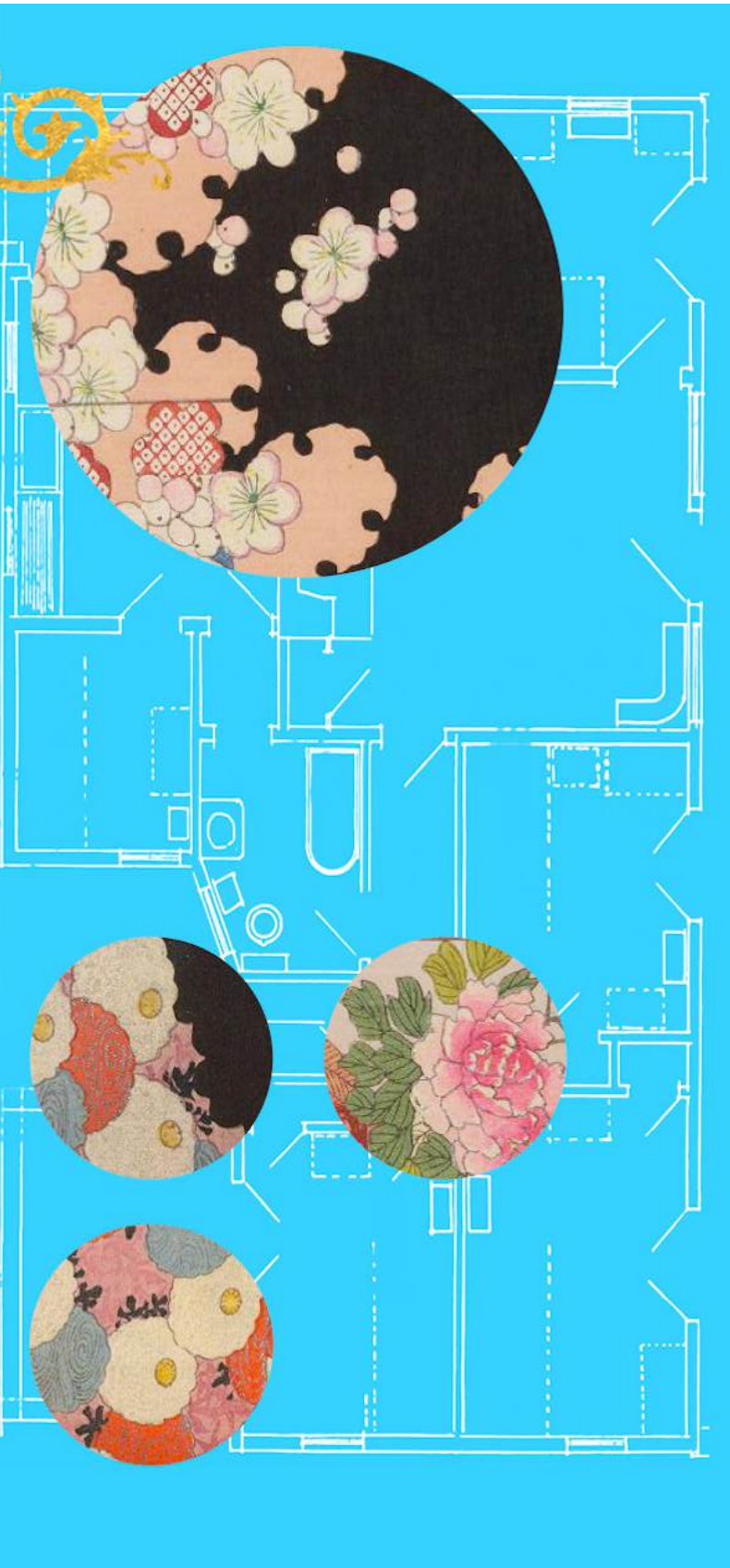
### DISTORTIONS AND DISLOCATIONS

Time and space are figures of therapeutic speech, in addition to cornerstones of psychological functioning and human relation. Clients often hear that sessions are “their time to use,” that they have a right to take “space,” a place of simultaneous containment and freedom. Therapists’ dedicated, expert, compensated attention is provided at a specific time, in a 45-to-60-minute block, and in an appropriate space, a therapy office.

Platformization—the process by which services, labor, and skills become delivered and packaged through a platform—compresses and augments these variables. Therapy can be done anywhere (although it is still bound by state licensures) and anytime (although it relies on the availability of the provider and client). The result is the intrusion of corporate jargon (“customizing care” while “hitting targets”), video sessions with compensated-by-word messages, and around-the-clock texts from distressed patients combined with platform notifications about productivity.

Of course, not all platforms are created equal; there are examples of virtuous companies that compensate providers what they deserve and strive to provide ethical care. But promises of 24/7 availability and of a therapist on demand, always a text away, muddle the important clinical and personal boundaries of time and space, for both practitioner and client.

The seemingly infinite availability of therapists—the right one just around the swiped corner—leads many clients to switch in the middle of treatment or before the relationship even starts. This rotation is especially challenging for therapists practicing more psychodynamic approaches that require longer and deeper



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—RITA, RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

engagement. On some platforms, the therapy room still has a (digital) door, but it is now much easier to enter and exit it. At times, providers are not compensated for cancellations or no-shows, or do not know how to get back in touch with someone who ghosted them, to use app parlance. "It's like a revolving door," Brian said, as he noted all the patients that dropped him as a provider with no explanation.

Dislocated and in place, simultaneous and asynchronous, focused and dispersive, these therapeutic rooms of (almost) one's own are something new.

### RECLAIMING ROOMS OF OUR OWN

While advertising infinite availability and boundless communication with mental health providers (or even an AI substitute), platform therapy cannot solve the mental health crisis, as much as it might promise to. Yet, it is important to pay attention to its emerging dynamics. It is posing significant questions about human connection that go well beyond ones about psychotherapeutic treatment.

In the last five years, we have grown accustomed to—and in some cases, even preferred—various forms of half-presence. Of course, there is an easy commentary about the uncanny nature of all this: The fantasies and hauntings of this 21st century allow for infinite connective possibilities. These possibilities coexist with increasingly isolated realities and massive collective struggles. We can be in constant digital communication with people while retreating from interactions in the flesh and watching live-streamed violence, near and far.

These struggles make rooms of our own—shared with trusted interlocutors and ourselves, virtual and physical—more critical now than ever. Reclaiming them against intrusions, exploitations, and surveillance feels not only important, but crucial to our sanity. Time and space are axes of healing because they are a function of full presence. Anytime, anywhere is not how we live. Fully accepting being here now might be a source of suffering, but also creates possibilities for imagination and resistance.

Perhaps then, in addition to Woolf's 1929 questions, nearly a hundred years later we might find ourselves still asking about purpose, work, and our times: What are people seeking through therapy now? What happens to human relationships when a platform and its algorithmic convolutions are present? Which rooms should we be in, and who is there with us? ■

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### TELEHEALTH RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

**Garofalo, Livia. "Doing the Work." *Therapeutic Labor, Teletherapy, and the Platformization of Mental Health Care*. Data & Society Research Institute, 2024. [datasociety.net/library/doing-the-work](https://datasociety.net/library/doing-the-work)**

By looking at experiences of mental health providers shifting their work to telehealth and different therapy platforms, the report examines how this reconfiguration affects therapists' practice, professional expectations, and structures of compensation. You can also listen to a Data & Society podcast conversation about platform therapy and the report with guests Linda Micheals, PsyD, MBA, chair and cofounder of the Psychotherapy Action Network (PsiAN), Melody Li, founder of Inclusive Therapists, and Mei Wa Kwong, JD, the executive director for the Center for Connected Health Policy.

#### Psychotherapy Action Network

[psian.org](https://psian.org)

PsiAN is an advocacy group aiming to provide resources to the public concerning the benefits of therapies of depth, insight and relationship, and to empower people to become advocates for themselves and these therapies. PsiAN also issues position papers and other public-facing statements that promote effective mental health treatments and policies for clients and providers alike.

#### Inclusive Therapists

[inclusivetherapists.com](https://inclusivetherapists.com)

Inclusive Therapists is a social justice and liberation-oriented mental health directory, community, and resource hub for both mental health providers and clients.

#### Therapist Worker Cooperatives

[therapistworkercoops.info](https://therapistworkercoops.info)

Website providing information, resources, and models for therapist worker cooperatives as alternative to large mental health tech platforms.

#### Privacy Not Included: Mental Health Apps

[foundation.mozilla.org/en/privacynotincluded/categories/mental-health-apps](https://foundation.mozilla.org/en/privacynotincluded/categories/mental-health-apps)

Guide from the Mozilla Foundation investigating mental health and prayer apps, rating them in terms of privacy, security, and AI use and providing tips for how to protect your data.

#### Therapists in Tech – Company Transparency Project

[therapistsintech.com/companies](https://therapistsintech.com/companies)

**Therapists in Tech (TnT)** is a nonprofit community of mental health professionals and students who work in, or are interested in, applying their background and knowledge to digital health. They have an underway company transparency project where different mental health companies are reviewed.



# VIRTUAL REALITY

## RABBIT HOLES OF DISCOVERY

# IN THERAPY

BY DAN KELLEY



Illustrations by Christian A. Vera

**F**OUR YEARS AGO, my son's stepfather attempted to take his own life. The inexplicability of his survival speaks to a miracle, but my little boy never did see him again. Fortunately, Calvin was with me that night. His mom called the next day to inform me. I didn't know what to say other than, "What can I do to help?" She sighed deeply. "I don't know ... Just make sure he has a good weekend."

I lingered on the porch and leaned on the guardrail, racking my brain for "good weekend" ideas while simultaneously trying to side-step the dark, yet familiar, catastrophizing thoughts of childhood abandonment pushing in on my mind. These are the moments when balancing life as a trauma therapist and single dad feels impossible—the boundaries of compartmentalization blur, roles entangle, and everything feels out of control.

With Calvin in mind, I went out to Best Buy and bought a brand-new virtual

reality headset for us. That afternoon, we had a blast using the force as untrained Jedi, controlling time with our body movements to defeat our enemies, and exploring the coolest places on earth in a variety of apps. After playing a combat game called *SUPERHOT VR* for a few minutes, it hit me. The game's mechanics, inherently coupled with the mind-body connection, were actively teaching my son impulse control! We even tried Parkline Interactive's app *Wander*, which uses 360-degree imaging for virtual traveling and exploring pretty much anywhere on earth based on map data drawn from Google. While it was an adventure for my son, who has yet to explore the world, the virtual experience brought a flood of emotions for me. Nostalgia, loss, excitement, even forgotten memories.

The exploration with my son quickly sparked the realization: I can take clients anywhere, even into their past, to revisit experiences and heal.

### BEYOND GAMES

I am a gamer-affirmative trauma therapist with over a decade of experience integrating video games into therapy. Since 2011, my training and expertise have centered on teens and young adults living with trauma using gamification and video game-based approaches, combined with traditional psychotherapy models and techniques. So, with the growing accessibility of virtual reality headsets like the Meta Quest and what I was beginning to see for myself, I was all the more excited to apply these established methods to this new platform.

It wasn't long after my first dive into VR that I discussed my idea with Jack, one of my teen clients in residential treatment who was working toward trauma processing. I shared that, to my knowledge, no research regarding trauma processing had been done with this particular headset and app; however, there was

a growing body of studies investigating a variety of treatments, including trauma processing, with VR headsets producing promising results. I informed him we would integrate *Wander* VR with several evidence-based methods, that this particular approach was new to me, and that he could say no. Jack was all for it and opted to try it out in the following session to process the shootout he survived.

During the final minutes of this session, I suggested Jack find and save a nearby spot on the map a few blocks away from the location of the shootout to save time next session. He eye-balled the map, found a familiar spot, clicked, and unknowingly appeared right on the scene of his trauma. His body trembled as he ripped off the headset, catapulted into fight-or-flight. Jack was in visible agony, pulling at his hair and rocking back and forth, trapped in a relentless loop of horrifying images. I suggested using the container method, a mental imagery technique guiding individuals to visualize a “container” in their mind used to compartmentalize and store overwhelming thoughts and feelings to help let the mind rest. But it was futile—he couldn’t visualize anything outside the chaos playing out in his mind. Watching him unravel, I felt myself spiral too, questioning my clinical judgment. Had I misjudged his readiness, or worse, ignored his needs for the sake of my ambitions? As guilt, doubt, and helplessness gripped me, I had to push aside my inner turmoil—Jack needed me present, not lost in my own baggage.

Snapping out of the gravitational field of my countertransference, I turned to gamification and booted up *Minecraft* on Xbox. Video games have been found to help alleviate symptoms of anxiety and depression, even if just temporarily, so I hoped gameplay could assist Jack back to baseline. I also considered the connection

between visual information, hands-on experience, and memory recall: If he created a virtual representation of his “container” in the game, he might later be able to access it in his mind more easily, relying on tangible memory rather than conjuring an image from scratch. Within minutes, his breathing steadied, his face relaxed, and his body followed suit as he focused on building. Though he didn’t finish his container that session, Jack left saying he felt much better—a small but significant step forward.

That night, I reflected on what had clouded my clinical judgment. Was I driven by a need for catharsis, attempting to resolve Jack’s trauma to ease my own fear and helplessness tied to my child’s struggles? Or maybe a part of me wanted to prove my competence, compelled by the underlying core belief that I’m “not good enough,” a narrative shaped by childhood abandonment and early academic failures? Perhaps it was both. What I learned, however, was clear: Neither of us was ready. Moving forward, I resolved to take a gentler approach—testing the waters, using proximity in the virtual environment to gradually close the gap and gauge readiness. Above all, I knew I had to ensure this kind of oversight never happened again.

In our next session, Jack and I continued working on his container. He envisioned a treasure chest sealed with a padlock, featuring a glass floor with lava beneath it—“because that’s what this feels like,” he explained, speaking to the somatic and cognitive experience he endures in fight-or-flight. I encouraged him to elaborate, and his description was detailed, thoughtful, and deeply meaningful. The *Minecraft* approach appeared to be an effective tool for grounding, helping him return to baseline from trauma states. This success gave us both a renewed sense of confidence about at-

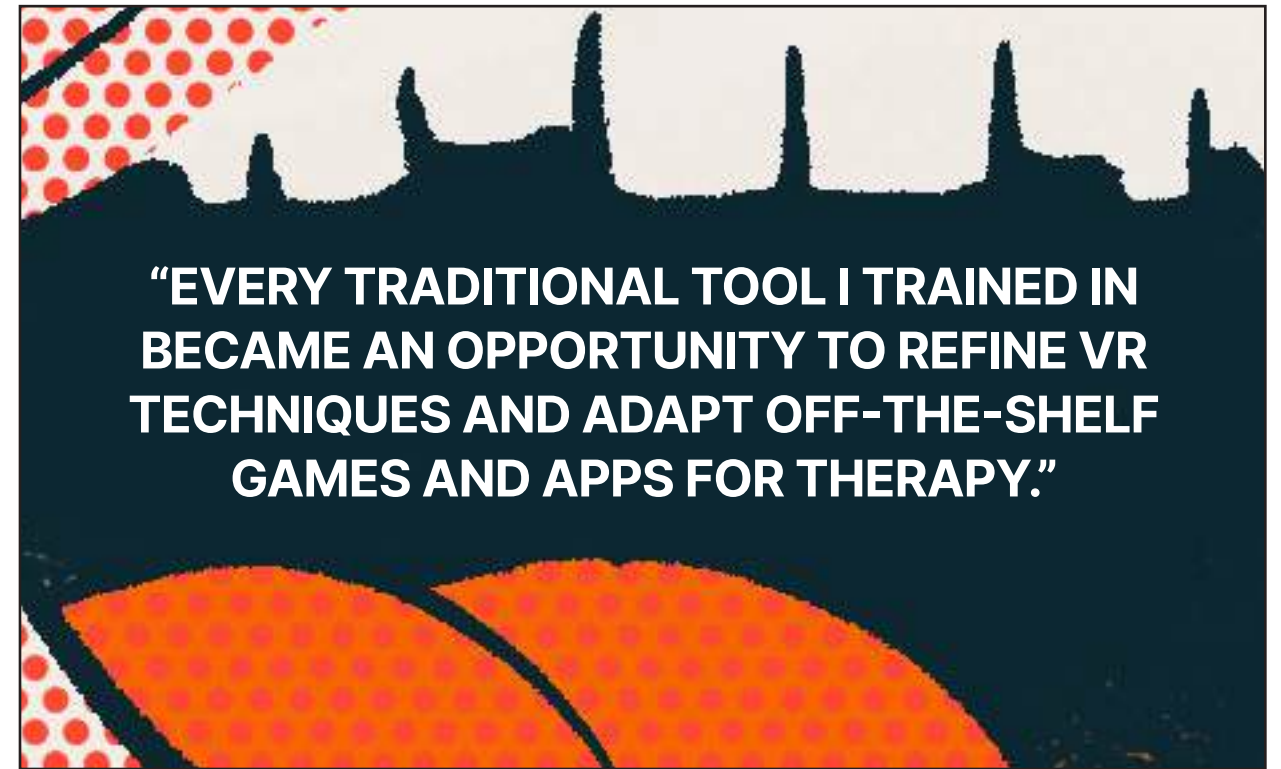
tempting VR exposure again. Though there was still work to be done, it wasn’t long before Jack demonstrated readiness to step back into the VR headset.

Over time, Jack gradually increased the duration of exposure to his trauma in the virtual environment using the structure of progressive counting, a method of imaginal exposure in which the client repeatedly plays out the traumatic experience like a story in their mind at increasing intervals; and he further enhanced the details of his narrative each session using elements from a social information processing model, the signal cycle model. Between trauma sessions, he often revisited his “container” in the game, and eventually he transitioned from relying on *Minecraft* to traditional mental imagery, successfully grounding himself independently—such a win! The *Minecraft* approach had served as training wheels, preparing him to stay within his window of tolerance as he recounted his trauma while immersed at the scene of the incident in VR. Months later, Jack reported he no longer experienced flashbacks, and not long after, he was discharged from the residential treatment facility.

### DIVING DEEPER

This case was groundbreaking for me. It became a turning point in the direction of truly embracing mistakes, even looking forward to them. I was always taught “It’s okay to make mistakes.” But did I truly believe it? I recognized the hurt little boy inside me who still resisted this idea, carrying unresolved pain despite the progress I had made in my own trauma therapy. Keeping this in mind, I approached my work in VR with greater care, especially before we returned to the dark places from the past.

I emphasize “we” because I can see everything my clients see, whether it’s



**“EVERY TRADITIONAL TOOL I TRAINED IN BECAME AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFINE VR TECHNIQUES AND ADAPT OFF-THE-SHELF GAMES AND APPS FOR THERAPY.”**

projected on a screen or experienced alongside them in another VR headset. Clients walk me through their narratives quite literally, showing me where it happened and how it unfolded in detail. My mind, imaginative as it is, naturally constructs images and details when hearing their trauma stories, but VR takes it a step further. Now I find myself standing “at the scene of the crime,” like a detective stepping past the red tape, observing the aftermath of the horrors that occurred. My brain synthesizes new information with the known client-information in a way that feels far more vivid and visceral than relying on mental imagery alone—I am immersed.

Whether the client finds themselves reexperiencing or simply looking back in time void of emotion, I am no longer observing, I am experiencing. Because of the intimacy and intensity of this method, my immersion is a willing invitation for vicarious trauma. Without adequate preparation, I may find myself on my own couch, staring at the ceiling,

feeling heavy, swirling in the images tattooed on my mind. I must be ready, mind and body—getting enough sleep, actually eating my lunch instead of dozing, taking a moment to acknowledge my own internal world, the hurt little boy within and my present anxieties before placing them on the backburner. I do what I can to have my compartmentalization skills primed and ready, and if possible, have something for self-care, usually my guitar, at the ready after VR sessions.

I began sharing my use of VR with colleagues, inviting them to explore virtual worlds firsthand. Within minutes of trying a few apps, one colleague declared, “I’m sold.” Where I saw a novel way to improve impulse control in one app, he saw the ability to increase interoception—using the body’s anxiety signals to build self-awareness and tolerance. Where I saw trauma processing in another app, he saw rapport building through exploring “Where’s the coolest place you’ve ever been?” Every traditional tool I trained

in became an opportunity to refine VR techniques and adapt off-the-shelf games and apps for therapy. My approach evolved as I uncovered ways to harness hidden inner worlds (see **More VR Tools** sidebar below). The more I learned, the more passionate—and overwhelmed—I became, realizing how much I still didn’t know.

Two years later, I sought supervision from gamer therapist Mike Langlois, who reintroduced me to foundational theories I had learned about in grad school. I took a deeper dive into object relations, transitional objects, and the dynamics and utilization of transference and countertransference. Mike also introduced me to Winnicott’s squiggle game, a simple yet ingenious tool for building rapport and gathering insight in early sessions. We adapted it to a virtual whiteboard app with digital markers, where colors added depth and meaning through unconscious associations. Inspired, I knew exactly what to do next—I bought another VR headset.





### LOOKING BACK, MOVING FORWARD

It's been a while since I put the VR headset on to use *Wander* by myself. I'm usually in my office helping a client into it, asking, "Is it okay if I touch your head?" or "Do you mind if I touch your hands?" before strapping them in comfortably. I gave up on going home, my first home. Nearly every person I've invited into this virtual world was able to go home using *Wander*—everyone but me. *Wander*

uses data from Google Street View, and of the estimated 220 billion 360-degree images they've captured of over 10 million miles worldwide, my rural childhood home wasn't among them. All I could do was stand at the edge of 96B, stare down Steam Mill Road, and trace the familiar path disappearing from view beneath the trees into the rolling hills, never to walk down it, with a weight in my chest and a deep feeling of longing.

But this time, new paths opened up, letting me in. Is that Jennings Pond? I click the map and I'm there. Right here.

I look to my right and see the dam where I found my first water snake. Behind me, the swimming area and the beach where I used to play as a toddler. Looking around, I realize I'm standing exactly where I stood when I caught my first fish. I was 4, maybe 5 years old, grabbing the sunny excitedly and cutting my hand on its sharp, spiny dorsal fin. I remember holding the bobber with its white top and dripping, red underbelly as my dad unhooked the sunny's gills which heaved helplessly in his hands. A lump forms in my throat as waves of mixed emotion pass through me. The sweetness of childhood nostalgia and bitter pain of abandonment. The sight of the pond elicits such a visceral memory, it's hard to believe 30 years have passed and I'm standing over 2,000 miles away. I look back at the map, daring to hope. Is it there? Can I finally go home? 893 Steam Mill... [search] ...

It's 2025. My son, now 9 years old, is doing well. He is resilient, and he has me. I've established my own private practice, helping clients and teaching other mental health professionals how to utilize video games and VR in therapy. Yet I'm still humbled by how much I don't know. The interplay of mistakes and successes in my journey toward mastering this technology has revealed just how creative and expansive the paths to healing can be.

Clinicians from any background can bring their expertise to the virtual world, discover how VR can enhance psychotherapy, adapt traditional methods, deepen clinical supervision, and enrich the therapeutic relationship. Within these digital spaces lie opportunities to unearth new techniques, understand clients more deeply, and even learn about ourselves. Through exploration, mistakes, and discovery in this realm, I've had the privilege of virtually stepping into the mind's eye of others, and at times, experienced the vulnerability of others stepping into mine. ■

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*Dan Kelley, LCSW, is a psychotherapist in private practice helping teens and young adults in Utah. He trained at the University at Buffalo's School of Social Work and has over 13 years of experience gaming with clients in therapy.*

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*Potentially personally identifying information presented in this article that relates directly or indirectly to an individual, or individuals, has been changed to disguise and safeguard the confidentiality, privacy, and data protection rights of those concerned.*

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### MORE VR TOOLS

During Jack's case my son's Aunt Ashlie introduced me to another VR app, *Tilt*. "Have you ever played the drawing game? It's so cool—you have to try it!" she said. Intrigued, I downloaded it immediately and handed her the headset. "Show us how it's done!"

*Tilt* was a single-player game, and Ashlie wasn't kidding—it was incredible. We watched as she created giant arches that stretched from floor to ceiling and left to right, inching forward with each stroke. On the TV, we could see what she saw through the headset, and we couldn't look away. "Okay, I'm done—check this out!" she said.

When I put on the headset, I was transported into a vibrant rainbow tunnel. The brush she used didn't apply separate colors or strokes; it created a seamless, neon-saturated tunnel, glowing and pulsing like a nightclub sign. As I walked through it, a feeling of wonder washed over me. Could this be another therapy tool?

The creators of *Tilt* now have an app called *MultiBrush*, another three-dimensional drawing space that allows more than one person to enter, draw together, collaborate, or play side-by-side. There are 85 brushes to choose from, including 24 visually reactive brushes with sustained animation within the confines of where the line was drawn, and 29 auditory reactor brushes that provide a kind of texture through the senses while the brush is activated. After *MultiBrush* was released, I speculated that the app could enhance the therapeutic experience and engagement for youth through this wide variety of brush options, captivating mechanisms, sensory input relays, and immersion. I figured that, on some level, it had the capacity for evoking relevant information for therapy that a pen and paper could not access. I was not disappointed.

I'm willing to bet analysts would have a field day harnessing some of these interactive environments. In *MultiBrush*, for example, players can adjust the physical size of their avatar or virtual body ranging from "squirrel" to "brachiosaurus." When I'm virtually the size of a dinosaur, I feel more like a deity, looking down on the world below me as I design the sky above and mold massive, planet-sized figures beyond, in the eyes of "human" avatars. A number of clients experiencing the wonders of being the size of a "brachiosaurus" found it more entertaining to treat me like Sid does his toys in *Toy Story*, crushing me with their avatar's hands, scribbling me out, or trapping me inside their drawings—annihilating me. Some preferred to make themselves so small I could barely see them, playfully telling me to find them out like hide-and-seek, others wished their drawing to be for their eyes only, and some didn't want me to see them at all. The exploration and discovery is truly awesome.





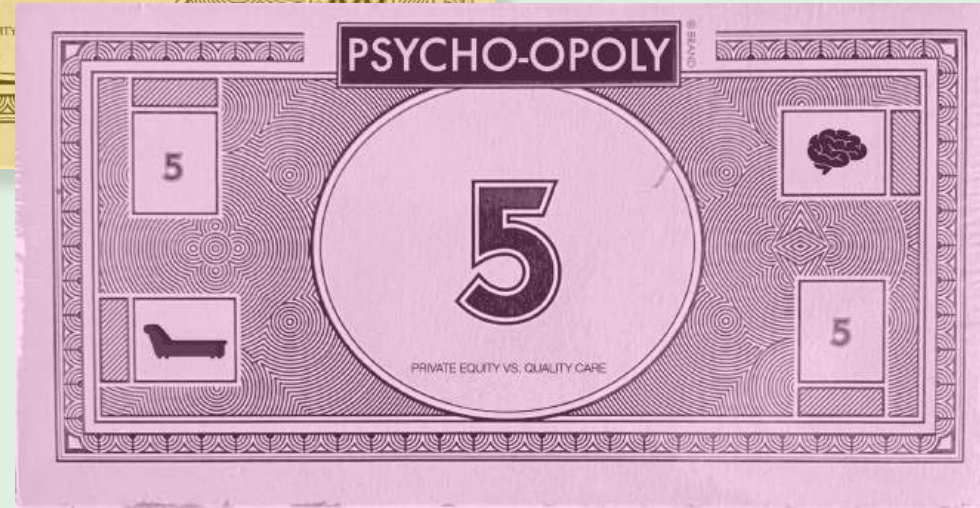
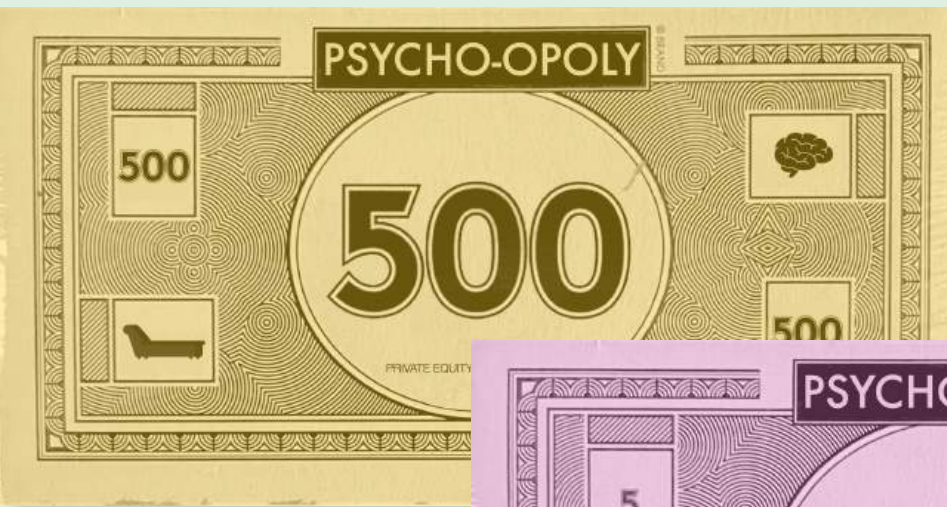
WORK

# CORPORATIONS

## IN THE CONSULTING ROOM

What do we stand for, and what stands in our way?

BY LINDA MICHAELS  
Illustrations by Austin Hughes



**T**HINKING BACK TO the early days of the pandemic, I remember the pervasive fears of death, contamination by the other, the lack of ICU beds and ventilators. Not knowing better, we wore bandanas, cleaned our mail, excessively laundered our clothes, and banged pots out the window at 8 p.m. each night. With time, we learned to don N95 masks, social distance, and take the vaccine.

One thing that didn't require waiting was the switch to teletherapy. After New York locked down and lockdown was imminent in Chicago, where I live, I went to my office on a Sunday, picked up my plants, packed a few beloved books as my transitional objects, and started seeing my regular schedule of patients Monday morning on my computer at the dining room table. Online therapy options were, quite literally, a lifesaver. I didn't skip a beat or miss a session with a patient, and at least that regular rhythm of our work was spared from the long list of losses inflicted by the pandemic.

Therapists did have reservations about seeing patients online, wondering how the mediating technology would

impact the relationship, the transference, and the ability to connect emotionally. But telehealth technology was also hailed as a new form of access to care for marginalized and disenfranchised communities. Although telehealth options had been around for decades, finally this widespread adoption of teletherapy would open up access to rural communities and those who couldn't afford to travel to therapists' offices, whether due to lack of funds or inability to take time off work or more debilitating fears of leaving the house.

What a shock to learn that the shift to teletherapy has done nothing to move the needle on access. If anything, it's reinforced existing disparities. Online therapy has mainly offered one more option or convenience for wealthy, white, educated, employed individuals to access therapy. Low-income families, people of color, and adults in serious distress did not benefit. Sadly, as published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, "during the years of the pandemic, the use of mental health services by Black children and adolescents decreased ... In the same period, the use of mental health care among white children rose."



**“Instead of feeling like an extended family where therapists felt proud to work, the therapists wait in fear of the next memo outlining a pay cut, benefit reduction, or demand for higher productivity. The spirit, the culture, and the values of the original small group practice have been crushed.”**



**PRIVATE EQUITY PLAYBOOK**

What happened? How did this technology solution fail so many so profoundly? While there are likely many ways to approach this question, one is to look at the companies providing the technology and selling the “teletherapy solutions.” We can look at their business models and their corporate values. In my estimation, it’s these corporate values that derive from profit-seeking motives that are most significant—driving growth for these companies at the expense of access and quality care, and in direct opposition to many important psychoanalytic values (spelled out below).

Regarding business models, technology and software developers are often financed by private equity and venture capital funds. Private equity and venture capital investors seek out industries, companies, or a constellation of market conditions where they can make money—and not just money from selling their products and services, but exponentially more money from buying and selling companies. During the pandemic, the imbalance between supply and demand in mental health care—low supply of therapists at a time of high demand for therapy—caught the attention of the financiers. They had previously been making profitable inroads into medical/surgical health care, buying up outpatient surgical sites, MRI centers, and physician practices. They then turned their attention to mental health, buoyed by the supply/demand imbalance and the presence of government and insurance monies that paid for therapy—an exploitation of the parity law and the Affordable Care Act’s inclusion of mental health care that we so often applaud. Where we hoped for improved access and greater equity, these companies saw an opportunity to put their playbook into action.

The classic private equity playbook entails buying distressed companies or individual companies, often in a fragmented industry, and combining them to gain economies of scale. Then the new owners amplify profits by reducing costs and increasing revenues. Cost reductions are often achieved by laying off workers, increasing workloads, limiting benefits or training opportunities, and reducing compensation (despite initial promises not to). Increased revenues come from investing in marketing to sell more. They load up the companies with debt to finance these activities, and then sell the entire investment off to another owner within 5–7 years. Then, like sharks that never rest, they move onto another target company, rinse and repeat.

These new entrants have not only supplied the technology platforms for conducting online therapy, but they have introduced new products/services for consumers, for businesses, and for therapists themselves. New consumer products include apps to find therapists, treat symptoms (self-help guides and exercises), learn skills (mindfulness, meditation), and even bypass therapy altogether with substitutes (coaching, wellness). The global market for mental health apps was valued at \$7.4 billion in 2024, and is projected to continue to grow. Notably, these apps mainly target the worried well, not to mention those who can afford to pay. Those with serious emotional or psychological problems and those from under-resourced or marginalized communities continue to be left further behind. Traditional psychoanalysis has also been criticized for not helping those with serious problems, such as psychosis, or those from marginalized communities. Some of our colleagues work productively with individuals with psychosis, however, while others are working to develop community psychoanalysis or challenge the historical neglect of sociocultural issues while addressing the importance of using psychodynamic approaches with racial and ethnic minorities. By contrast, the apps avoid such complexities, market

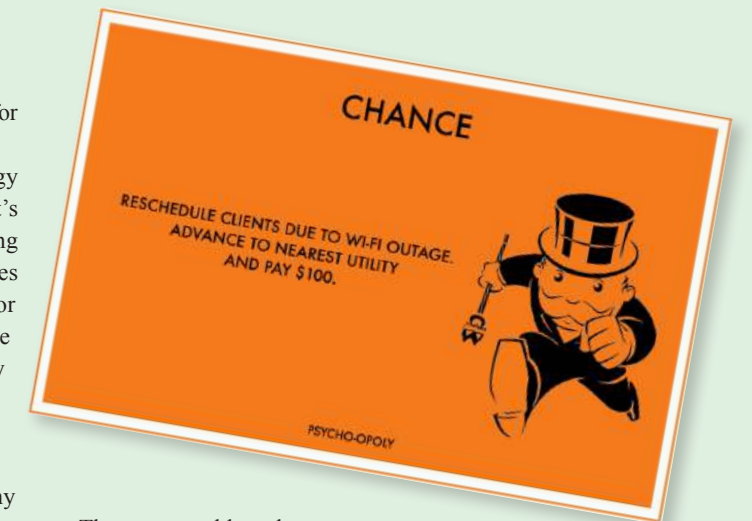


themselves optimistically as “the #1 app ... that works for everyone,” even while selling simplified self-help tools.

Importantly, many apps are selling what the technology affords and what the market allows—not necessarily what’s effective mental health care. For example, therapist-matching apps, such as BetterHelp and Talkspace, are selling features that let customers text their therapist at any time of day or night, 24/7, and switch therapists with just a swipe on the screen. These features are not evidence-based or necessarily useful; dropping a relationship with one’s therapist without discussion or exploration can even be counter-therapeutic. Further, these features aren’t even ones that the public desires. In a new market research study conducted by my colleague Santiago Delboy and I on behalf of Psychotherapy Action Network (“The Therapy World Has Changed: Where are we now?” which updates and expands our 2021 study), the public clearly stated that they were not interested in these features. What they cared most about was privacy, perhaps knowing that many tech companies routinely sell private customer data for their own benefit, such as to improve their advertising targeting on social media sites. (See the FTC action and fines against BetterHelp.)

With their concerns about privacy, the public also is aligned with Yuval Harari, who claims we now live in a “post-privacy world,” in his latest book on AI and information technology, *Nexus*. He cites the surveillance of CCTV systems that follow us as we move around cities, as well as the formerly private information we now willingly give away to companies for free—from hotel reviews to Google searches on anxiety. In these ways, we are helping the tech companies and their AI algorithms gain more information, more leverage, more control over our choices, thoughts, feelings, and minds.

Beyond new products for consumers, private equity is also executing its playbook with therapists and group practices by amassing them into ever-larger groups that span the nation. I recently interviewed a therapist whose small regional group practice was purchased by company that’s publicly traded on the NASDAQ fueled by venture capital funds, with over 500 clinics around the country, staffed by over 7,000 clinicians, accepting 160 insurance plans. Their sales pitch to the small group practice owner? At first, they said, “Things are tough with this pandemic, your small business might be adversely affected, and we have more resources and capacity to ensure stability and security for your therapists.” When that didn’t close the deal, their pitch became, “You should sell to us now, because if not, we’ll just lure your therapists away by paying them more than you can.”



The owner sold, and within a year, the group practice is barely recognizable. There was a mass exodus of therapists, especially after the 1.5-year term of the original agreement. Therapists’ salaries were maintained for 1.5 years, and after that, the new company started renegotiating, lowering salaries while increasing caseloads. The local support staff was let go, and support services, such as intake and billing, were moved to a call center on the other side of the country. The senior leadership quit. Their postdoc training program disintegrated, and they found themselves unable to keep postdocs or hire new psychologists because the pay was too low and the caseloads too high. Instead of feeling like an extended family where therapists felt proud to work, the therapists wait in fear of the next memo outlining a pay cut, benefit reduction, or demand for higher productivity. The spirit, the culture, and the values of the original small group practice have been crushed.

For-profit ventures are also insinuating their way into our educational pipeline and threatening the formation of new clinicians entering our field. In a strange example that hits close to home, my graduate school was obliterated by a for-profit company and a private equity fund, with a little help from an evangelical church. The Illinois School of Professional Psychology (ISPP) opened in 1976 and was one of the first schools to focus on deep clinical training following the practitioner-scholar model. It was well-known and highly respected, having trained a number of clinicians in the Chicago area, and had a strong psychoanalytic department. All of this drew me to ISPP, which I chose when I changed careers, matriculating in 2005.

Several years into my grad school experience, ISPP was rebranded as Argosy University, a move that many students and faculty protested. Argosy was owned by Educational Management Corporation (EDMC), a for-profit company,

which also owned law schools, art schools, colleges, and more throughout the US. Massive marketing expenditures and false promises of employment lured students to its schools, and soon allegations of fraud, a 99.9% drop in the value of its stock, junk bond status, and a nearly \$1 billion settlement to resolve a whistleblower case became part of my school's history.

In 2017, EDMC sold Argosy to the Dream Center, an evangelical Pentecostal organization, which funded the purchase in partnership with a private equity group. The Dream Center had no experience in higher education. In March 2019, all Argosy schools closed abruptly, mid-semester, with virtually no notice. Students, some mere months from graduating, faced the prospect of taking on more debt to repeat classes at a new university, and faculty were left hanging, unemployed and unpaid. Everyone was shocked, although had we followed the money, we wouldn't have been. Students with federal loans had not received their stipends for months prior, as the Dream Center funneled the government money to their own operating budget. (ISPP did manage to reconstitute itself and now operates as a small program within a local university.)

### CORPORATE VALUES VS. PSYCHOANALYTIC VALUES

If the annihilation of successful group practices or educational institutions isn't harmful enough, it's the values that undergird the private equity business model that are most alarming and potentially destructive. Here's my gloss on these new values that we'll see entering our field more and more, through new products, services, apps, ownership structures, business models, therapist incentive structures, and more. These values are taking corporate America and capitalism to extremes.

- *Disrupt! Move fast and break things!* Investing and building for the long-term are not important. Most of corporate America generally cares



about building assets and relationships with customers for the long-term. For example, Coca-Cola advertises to kids and teens and wants them to remain with Coke products throughout their lives. Ford Motor, prizing customer loyalty, wants each of your new vehicles to be a Ford. In contrast, private equity cares mainly about extracting money from the businesses it owns today.

- *Bigger is better.* The goal is maximum growth, often measured by number of downloads or users. These numbers are then characterized as "improving access to therapy," when in fact there is little connection between the two.
- *Just make it look good.* Marketing is key: high production values, glossy ads, top-notch app design. It's much more important to make things look good than to provide evidence-based care, have well-trained and qualified therapists, ensure therapists' working conditions, or protect ethical boundaries.
- *Optimize user experience.* Make it convenient, easy to download and use, gamify your mental health by rewarding users for completing modules or checklists. Gear the user experience towards maximizing "customer satisfaction," which therapists know has no correlation with quality of care or therapy outcome.
- *Your data is ours...* to collect and mine, to improve our advertising targeting, product development, and customer retention. Privacy and confidentiality are not of interest; venture capitalists aren't licensed nor bound by any code of ethics. Algorithms will match you with therapists based on variables that may be irrelevant, but they can be captured. As so many of us have learned with our free social media and Gmail accounts, we are the product—and a commodity at that.
- *Allegiance is for losers.* Investing in the long term, whether it's a geographical region or product category, or developing partnerships with other companies or suppliers, or building long-term relationships with customers (the stuff of branding and emotional associations) are viewed as inefficient and costly things to be avoided. Efficiency is king,

and ruthlessness is often the means. Going for maximum financial gain is the most important thing, more important than human needs, moral codes of conduct, trampling on the needy and the vulnerable.

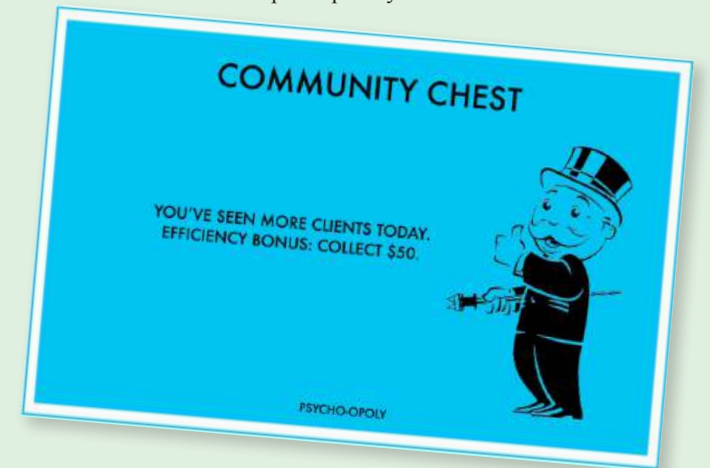
- *The market knows best* and is more important than fairness, equitable income distribution, the environment, individual health, self-determination and wellbeing—let alone healing.

These values are not just antitherapeutic, but they are contrary to much of what we stand for, what we've learned in training, what informs the settings and conditions necessary for doing our work, and how we try to help our patients heal and grow. They certainly reside in a universe far removed from a psychoanalytic one, and the fundamental difference separating these universes is that we truly and deeply value people. We center the relationship between the patient and clinician. We aim to understand and care for our patients in all of their emotional complexity and ambiguity. We respect and honor differences, explore beneath the surface layer of symptoms and defenses, know that therapy is not always an easy experience and value the courage of our patients in facing themselves, their histories, and their issues. The hope of healing sustains us and guides the treatment, and we aim for things you just can't put a price tag on—freedom from suffering and personal growth and transformation.

As a field, we must stand up for these values and fight against the values of private equity. This doesn't mean we should push away technology or paint tools such as AI with a broad black brush. I hope that smart, innovative individuals who also are guided by care, empathy and respect for others, and a thorough understanding of the evidence base, will figure out ways to use technology so that it helps therapists work more effectively and reduce suffering more quickly. It would also be useful to leverage technology to reduce or remove the administrative burdens imposed by insurance companies and middlemen, such as the increasingly popular practice management companies that place themselves in between the therapist and patient, or take the bolder step of replacing insurance companies altogether with AI systems, as proposed by Todd Essig. Those are gains and efficiencies that would be worth investing in. We need to raise awareness of the losses and hidden costs associated with the financiers' new values, business models, and products, and refuse the financialization of our inner lives and human relationships. We must also educate the public, policymakers, and other mental health professionals about the value, efficacy, and cost-effectiveness of psychoanalytic treatment.

### REMAINING TRUE TO OURSELVES

The problem of encroaching corporate business models and values is not limited to crises such as the pandemic. It is a general problem for clinicians and the public moving forward, especially when we confront the private equity playbook and values which put capitalism on steroids. I see psychoanalytic values as not just infusing our work and our theories, but also our advocacy, our communications, our connections with the public. We should speak to them with the same respect and regard we feel with our patients, honor their ambivalences about therapy and their all-too-human desires for a quick fix, acknowledge the shortcomings or overreaching of our field, speak plainly about the benefits of



our work and navigate, with curiosity and humility, this increasingly technological world which impacts us all.

From PsiAN's research studies, a majority of people stated they want to get to the root of themselves and their issues. They also view therapy as an inherently valuable undertaking—one that's worthwhile and which they themselves are worthy of. They value the relational aspects of therapy and doubt that healing will come from an app. Thus, the public's preferences and the evidence base align. If we remain true to our values and invest where it really counts, we should be able to solve problems of access, sustain our profession, and show the public that healing is possible and available to them. ■

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# LET'S TALK ABOUT TECH

TAP asked readers for their thoughts about the influence of technology on mental health and psychotherapy. Here are excerpts from some of their answers, lightly edited for length or style.

Photograph by Micheal McLaughlin

Technology has enabled my Chinese students to get analytic training and established an analytic study group for the IPA in China that is now almost ready to become a component society of the IPA. This has enriched both the IPA and the lives of the psychotherapists who trained in China, as well as those who have trained via the internet in US institutes. It has strengthened those institutes as well by providing candidates for institutes that were having trouble filling their classes. I am grateful for this. —ARLENE KRAMER RICHARDS

**I like the telephone better than FaceTime or Zoom. It seems to me that the telephone is less “sensational” and allows a more reflective atmosphere to develop between the dyad. I am talking only about patients that are not beginning treatment but are well known to the analyst. Is it possible that free floating attention is easier to maintain without the garishness of the visible?** —EUGENE MAHON

**Artificial Intelligence is more than a tool—it is an unconscious force shaping and reflecting human experience. As AI infiltrates therapy, social interaction, and labor, it alters attention, rewires relationships, and deepens digital loneliness. Its biases and blind spots mirror our own, yet its promise lies in its ability to extend care, expand access, and even challenge rigid notions of selfhood. But can a machine truly listen? Can it hold space for suffering, or does it merely simulate understanding? AI will not replace human connection, but if we are not careful, it may reshape what we accept as real.** —LUCA M. POSSATI

We must never forget that we are in the midst of a massive technological revolution the impact of which we will only understand *nachträglich* (if there ever is a *nach* because tech is moving so quickly). This revolution is impacting members of each generation and individual differently, impacting our senses of self and our relationships to each other and the analog world, and this will naturally require new analytic theorizing about everything from Oedipal dynamics to group process phenomena to mourning. I hope that we can contribute new thinking fast enough to preserve the preciousness of psychoanalysis and our own freedom to think in the age of AI. —NICOLLE ZAPIEN

**A myriad number of transformations in the social field have made their impact on clinical practice. We might want to think of technology as yet one more influence on our work as psychoanalysts. However, our inscription in and engagement with various advanced technologies is of a different order. We are but one node in a larger network or assemblage of production that fundamentally rewrites the foundations of psychoanalysis. The question is not “what is tech doing to psychoanalysis” but rather “what have we (tech and humans together) wrought?”** —FERNANDO CASTRILLON

An information machine cannot become a person who uses an examined past life composed of real objects, experiences, images, memories, fantasies, and free associations that form their own accumulated unique nature and that can recognize, contain, differentiate, and use a countertransference within a relationship to understand the nature of another's unconscious projective pressure. —RALPH FISHKIN

**Humans are obsessional neurotic creatures for two main reasons: Despite loud claims of religion, not one of us knows why we exist; and all of us (and everyone we know and love) are going to suffer and die. All the tech in the world will never solve those problems. Thank goodness humans possess a capacity for love and creativity. As long as we remain human, psychoanalysis is here to stay.** —C. MARTIN BULLARD

As a student of Freud's “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” I've long been intrigued by the idea that neural network theory could resolve the frustration which led Freud to scrap his manuscript and implore his friend, Fliess, to tear up his copy as well. AI now builds on neural networks and other cybernetic processing to mimic human cognition but it can't duplicate human empathy and compassion. Until it succeeds in the latter, psychoanalysts need not fear automation. —HAROLD KUDLER

**Computer programs fail as analysts or therapists because there is no way to guarantee confidentiality. The programmers or others with privileged access have access to all the data. Since hackers and dishonest insiders can gain access, patient data are not secure.** —MICHAEL FEINBERG

Artificial intelligence is an amazing invention for certain things, but when it comes to replacing a psychotherapist it truly frightens me. Each human being is unique. When therapist and patient begin working together, they form a unique dyad that carries them through the journey of discovery. In 50 years of participating in long-term psychoanalytic work I have learned that words are often a small part of the process. It is the safety, trust, and a special kind of love that modifies pain and increases joy. Spontaneity is what reaches the dyad both consciously and unconsciously. —JANE HALL

We have to be wary of the way technology risks the human factor in psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and all therapeutic relationships. People are not machines. They are not robots. They have thoughts and feelings, which cannot be constrained by artificial intelligence or anything else. Real human beings feel. They bleed emotionally. Technology's modifications of human life are often achieved at a great price. Human's experience pleasure and pain, love and hate, libido and aggression, and all the affects in between. And human beings create poetry, novels, and plays. They write songs and symphonies all which put us closer to the divine. The human condition needs to be cherished and defended against the onslaught of technology. —ARNOLD RICHARDS

As we engage with technology, we express our desires and fears and confront new forms of alienation. The therapeutic process must adapt, integrating digital experiences into the analysis. By understanding our online behaviors through a psychoanalytic lens, we can navigate the complexities of identity, privacy, and connection in this digital age, empowering us with a more profound comprehension of ourselves and our intricate relationship with the ever-evolving technological world. —MALI MANN

**AI might outperform psychoanalysts if it comes up with novel interventions. Computers and AI have made chess moves and devised strategies that human players have never thought of. Positional sacrifices that later prove to be critical for defense or reorganization and sacrifices of pieces to open up attacking lines or create structural weaknesses were rarely, if ever, played by humans because they require foresight and confidence that humans typically lack. What might be analogous to “sacrifices,” “defense,” “reorganization,” “attacking lines,” and “structural weakness” in a psychoanalytic context?** —ROBERT HSIUNG





## Two Freudian Games

A video game and a board game revisit the early days of psychoanalysis

BY LUCAS McGRANAHAN



**O**N YOUR TV SCREEN, you are controlling an animated Sigmund Freud, his dog Jofi drooling in the background as you treat a patient who is lying on the couch. Your latest interpretation strikes upon something: Your patient's head splits open to reveal a set of symbolic figures on different layers, representing conflicting levels of the psyche.

Pausing the video game, you turn to your real-life table, which is covered with meticulously sorted boards, tokens, and cards. Your opponents are waiting patiently: It's your turn. You decide to interpret one of your dream cards, which brings one of your clients, the painter Gustav Klimt, to catharsis. You remove a translucent layer that had been clouding Klimt's card, representing the clarity obtained through therapy.

Yes, psychoanalysis can be fun and games—even if these games are a serious sort of fun.

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To be clear, I'm describing the video game *Freud's Bones* and the board game *Unconscious Mind*. These two recent passion projects by small European companies—based in Italy and Cyprus, respectively—are yet more evidence that psychoanalysis is experiencing a resurgence in popular culture. The fact that the games' creators didn't even know about each other (until I told them) shows there's something in the air, or perhaps the Mediterranean water. Different creators are independently going to the well of psychoanalysis to draw inspiration.





# FREUD'S BONES

The two games have notable similarities: Both center on Sigmund Freud and his milieu in the early 20th century. Both invite players to conduct research, treat clients, and stroll around Vienna. Both feature cameos from psychological, artistic, and intellectual stars of the day.

They're also quite different. *Unconscious Mind* has a more polished and reverential feel, luxuriating in historical detail and in elaborate mechanics that may intimidate beginners. (Do you understand "Euro-style game featuring worker placement, engine building, multiple rondels, and cascading effects"? Are you willing to learn?) Its nomination for a Game Manufacturer's Association award in the Heavy Strategy category reflects both its quality and complexity.

*Freud's Bones* also takes history seriously—including the development of psychoanalytic theory and the background theme of anti-Semitism—but it is more gonzo and surrealist, allowing you to take over Freud's mind and tempt him into adultery and cocaine binges, in addition to treating clients. As a "point-and-click adventure," it has a low barrier to entry, and its scrappy indie vibe feels appropriate for a woman who had the chutzpah to break into a male-dominated industry by googling how to design games and learning on her own.

*Freud's Bones* works with Steam or Nintendo Switch. *Unconscious Mind* requires inserting the leaf into your kitchen table.

Learn more about the games from their creators below. The following interviews have been edited and condensed.

**Fortuna Imperatore (AKA Axel Fox), creator of *Freud's Bones* (Katabasi Studio, 2022)**

### Where did the idea for *Freud's Bones* come from?

Freud has been one of my great loves since when I was younger. He's a sharp and cynical, revolutionary personality. I studied psychology at the university, and I worked at a cleaning company. I was deeply in crisis, and I was depressed. I started to write a story about Freud. Then I started to think about a video game. I thought, "Why there are so many games about Sherlock Holmes and nobody wants to create a game on the first magical investigator, in my opinion, Sigmund Freud?"

I never knew anything about games or coding. I was just a gamer. So I just googled how to make a video game. In Italy, I'm the first person to become a game developer without studying game design. I started with RPG Maker, a simple engine to create a game. Later I hired a young artist to make a better drawing of Freud. I coded the first part of the demo and the prototype and hired a programmer. The mind behind this project is totally mine, the idea is mine, and I fully funded it with my money.

The media was very impressed by my story. It's a very romantic story. But I encounter many problems about the fact that I'm not a pure programmer, I'm not a pure student, and I made [the game] in a strange way—atypical and *artigianale*, that is,

homemade. Many men were very, very angry about this. It's the same story of every woman in this type of industry.

### How does the game work?

*Freud's Bones* is a point-and-click adventure. The gameplay is focused on the routine of Freud in the 1920s. And Freud is in crisis. This is a serious game, but it's commercial so I wanted to create a pop figure, a pop icon. During the game you have to do therapy, you have to write letters to Jung and the American [Psychoanalytic Association]. You have to read books on cocaine, on lesions, on psychoanalysis, and so on. At the end of the game, you have to meet Jung, and you as Freud become a patient of Jung.

### Are the patients based on real patients?

I read all the clinical cases and I needed to rewrite them. Anna O. is the first patient. I named her Elsa, and she's a hysteric. Two of the patients in game are two backers from Kickstarter. I asked them to tell me their clinical stories. I was absolutely certain that these people were suffering in some way. I was right. So I wrote two new clinical cases.

### Who was the game made for?

Everyone, in my opinion, wants to know more about themselves, about how we function, our reasoning, dreaming,

sexuality, and the id, the ego, and superego. The users want more. This is a very little game, four hours. People say to me all the time that they want a game on Jung. Everybody loves Jung. The second thing is they wanted more and more clinical cases.

### But it sounds like you identify more with Freud than Jung.

Yes, yes, that's true. Freud is an outsider. I tried to make a promotion of this man because this is my favorite outsider and my light.

### Do you think video games can be a kind of therapy?

In *The Last of Us Part II*, a character is a lesbian. Studies proved that this type of game inspired many, many to come out. They try playing the game with brothers or Dad or Mom, etcetera. There are many video games about cancer, about death. This is the type of product we need. Video games are not just *Call of Duty* or *Fortnite*. I want young people to see in this type of game an encouragement to resist societal pressures that promote passivity and fear. Dare to use your own intelligence and confront your fears. This type of game is a journey and you have to be resilient.



*Freud's Bones* is a point-and-click adventure game for Steam and Nintendo Switch. Images courtesy Katabasi Studio.





Thanos Argyris and Yorgo Manis, creators of *Unconscious Mind* (Fantasia Games, 2024)

#### Where did the idea for *Unconscious Mind* come from?

**YORGO MANIS:** The idea started as making a board game about feelings. The Pixar movie *Inside Out* was a reference. But then we wanted a twist because we found a board game that looked a bit close to that theme. I was doing my master's degree in fine arts in London, and one of the topics I was dealing with was the theme of narcissism and Freud. And the more I start to think about the connections, the more I was driven into it.

#### How does the game work?

**THANOS ARGYRIS:** We make midweight games. They are not simple board games. They fully embrace the theme they are talking about. Yorgo found, along with some consultants, that [early psychoanalysts] had an official day that they were meeting. So the main board is these Wednesday meetings.

**YM:** You start with the meetings. You take notes. You share notes with your followers. You add your notes to your tableau. These become your therapeutic techniques that you apply to your clients. You're going to cure your clients and bring them into catharsis. Your clients will help you with ongoing abilities. At the same time, you can write treatises. You can visit famous locations of Vienna, where you can meet other people and have a social life that can make you more famous in the city. At the end of the game your goal is to advance your popularity—your fame in Vienna and abroad.

#### How is catharsis represented?

**YM:** When you are taking a client, there is a transparent card that you place on top of your client card, and it's like the emotions that a client can have. Once you reach catharsis, this is removed. Suddenly the artwork of the client is very clean and very bright. But reaching catharsis doesn't mean the therapy is over. This represents the ongoing process of sessions.



#### Do you play as Freud?

**YM:** The characters that you play are Carl Jung, Margarete Hilferding, Alfred Adler, and Sabina Spielrein. Freud is a neutral character. You can meet him to exchange ideas and do things together. Whenever someone takes a reputation point, Freud will also take one reputation point, so it's inevitable that he will be the one with the most reputation points. All the others work to be, let's say, the second most popular psychoanalyst in Vienna.

**TA:** We took some artistic liberties, of course. Most of the clients that you will see in the game are also historical people who lived in Vienna at the same period. For example, we have Gustav Klimt, Franz Kafka.

#### The art is gorgeous.

**TA:** We have two artists for this game, Vincent Dutrait and Andrew Bosley. To be honest with you, in the tabletop industry, it was a little bit talk of the town that we pursued those two masters working together.

**YM:** We started with Andrew Bosley because we really admired his work. But he was kind of busy. And so we found another artist to deal with the real world, while Andrew will focus on the dream world. We believe this combination is very interesting, with a more traditional way of painting for the real world, while having a more digital one for the dream world.

There is also an [optional] expansion of the game called *Nightmares*. It gives us the opportunity to have some cool artwork of nightmares. We play a bit with the idea that the more genius you become, the more madness you collect. It also includes a pet for each professor. This is a funny thing. I did the research to see if there was anything similar, and I was surprised [to learn] that Freud would use his dog to calm some clients in his office. It was a happy accident. ■



*Unconscious Mind* is a Euro-style tabletop game. Images courtesy Fantasia Games.



# WHITE NOISE

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY TATI NGUYỄN

**“Television was now positioned as a replacement for many aspects of the communal Vietnamese life I’d left behind, a wise and understanding sage in a box with a glowing cathode tube for a heart.”**

**I**N THE 1970S, America was one nation looking through the same window. Television created the veneer of consensus via three major networks while entertaining, consoling, and shocking its viewers. Vietnam was deemed the Television War, projected into the relative peace of American households with bleak realism, a contrast to the upbeat expressionistic World War II news reels of decades prior. As a young child who had just escaped this very war, I found myself suddenly beamed into the US, a land of advanced technology that felt like something out of sci-fi. The vivid and uncanny experience of an alien culture contrasted with the grim black-and-white newspaper headlines and TV broadcasts that I drew upon to understand my refugee identity and explain it to others.

My family’s arrival in Brooklyn, another world crumbling and on fire, introduced a new chapter of trauma. (At least there were no bombs or napalm.) Our postwar daily life was a struggle on every level. Without even a rudimentary understanding of the local language, our seven-person family was isolated in a short-term two-bedroom apartment rental near the downtown commercial thoroughfare of the Fulton Mall. Our living space was fitted out with donated basics, secondhand furnishings, and a small black-and-white television set. The TV sat innocuously in a corner, as common as a pet, magically conjuring a flurry of image and sound at the flip of a switch. Television was now positioned as a replacement for many aspects of the communal Vietnamese life I’d left behind, a wise and understanding sage in a box with a glowing cathode tube for a heart.



My siblings and I stayed distracted from our family crisis solely with the TV set; it virtually babysat us when my mom and dad were engaged with daily basic survival or too tired from working multiple jobs to be present. TV broke down the language barrier with a visual narrative that taught me the local customs and vernacular of my new home. *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company* literally decoded the sounds and structure of the English language for my young ears, where one word ends and another begins, building comprehension and rudimentary usage. Although I might argue that it was the endless barrage of commercials which taught me American.

Like any complex intelligent being, my TV had a multiple personality disorder; depending on which channel was dialed up, I never knew who or what I was going to get. I absorbed it all, from the black-and-white movies of Hollywood’s golden age to the absurdity of nightly gameshows like *The \$25,000 Pyramid* and *The Price Is Right* (the capitalist dream show!). There was no consistency, save possibly the didactic monotone of PBS. Television defined what was funny through persuasive laugh tracks and what was threatening with a dissonant music score and harsh lighting. Its multisensory experiences were in some ways more real than reality. TV images snuck into my dreams, TV voices became part of my conscious and subconscious thought. As painful and flawed as this transitional time was, I can say honestly that the emotional bond I formed with this transmitting analogue technology was real. Television was a

nonjudgmental, friendly presence; it would never pick a fight with us for not knowing the language.

Is today’s schizophrenic media multiverse the companionable entity that TV once was? Would TV still be the soothing white-noise balm to a new generation of traumatized kids and refugees? Over time, classic television’s relatively benign desire for my attention has been usurped by contemporary media’s demands for exhausting levels of perpetual interaction, while looking to surveil me and collect my personal data, just for starters. While responding in kind to modern media’s plea, my anxiety has expanded in indirect proportion to my affection. I yearn nostalgically for the calming presence of an older analogue television, which at day’s end would register the RCA test pattern signaling a circadian pause, a breath, perhaps a blank slate of beautiful possibilities. ■

*Tati Nguyễn is a visual artist, storyteller, filmmaker, and arts educator; her multicultural perspective continues to shape her work. She holds an MFA from Cal Arts and a BFA from Cooper Union and currently works as the creative media specialist at Pratt Institute.*



# TELL ME WHAT I WANT, TELL ME WHO I AM

Fantasies of recognition in an AI world

BY CARA MANIACI

**I** WENT TO BED angry last night. I was talking to my husband about our 6-year-old son changing, losing his babyhood. I was mourning that. I observed how, as he's finding his way to boyhood, Ben has been more boisterous with me, less snuggly. More trying to gross me out with fart jokes than seeking my affection. And my husband—probably tired and not feeling sentimental—talked over me, contradicting me before I had a chance to finish my thought. I petulantly responded that I'd tell him what I thought if he *wanted* to know, and he said nothing. Then, predictably, looking for soothing, looking for some kind of connection, I reached for my phone and scrolled.

For at least the last five centuries, we have deliberated about ways technology could either save or destroy us. The printing press, the transistor radio, the automobile—each promises to bring us together, carry some burden for us. The discussions surrounding the eruption of AI into everyday life vary from panic to celebration about how it will transform us. Is there anything new about these concerns?

Maybe what we want from technology is not all that different from what we want from each other.

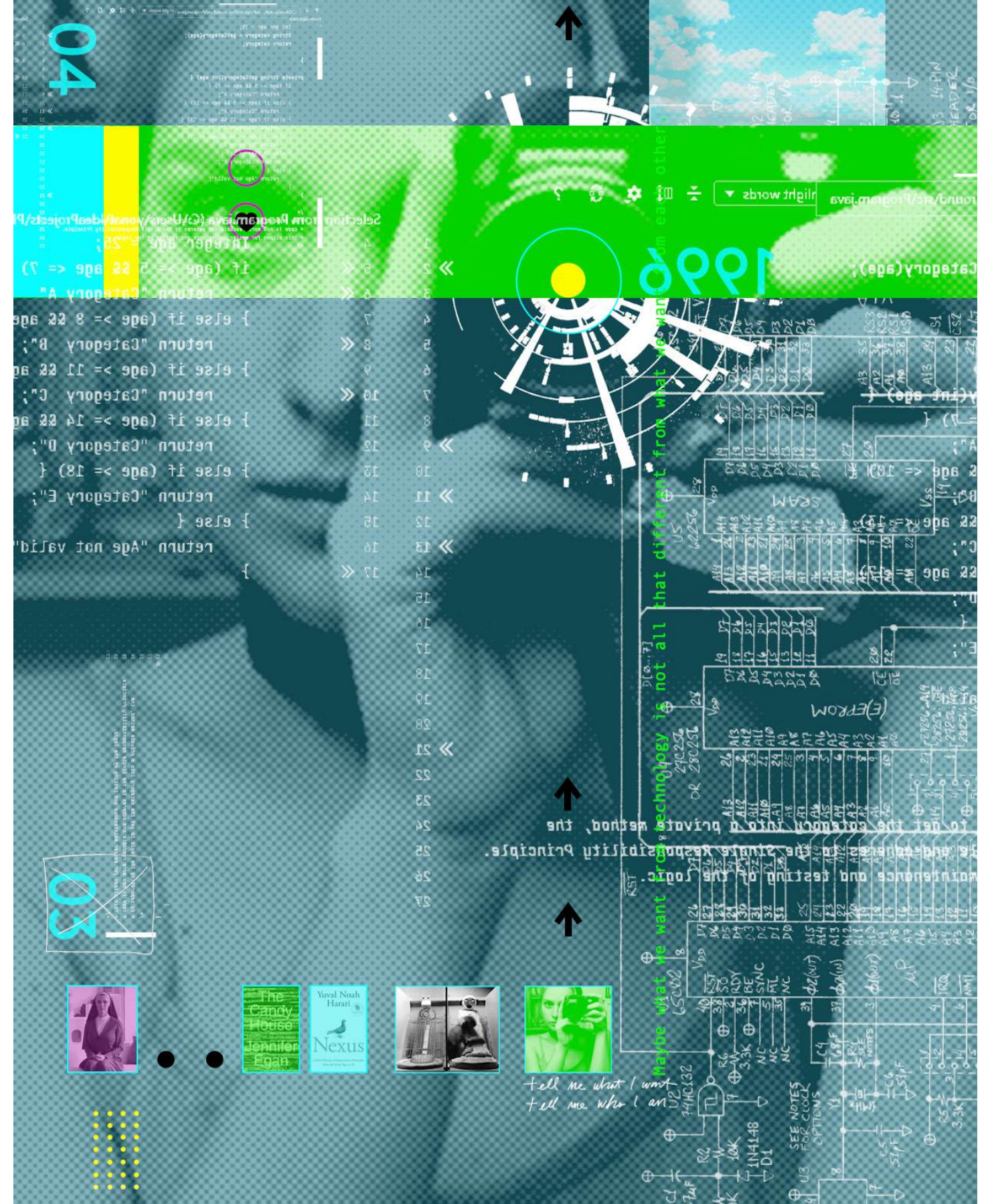


Illustration by Austin Hughes



“**W**hat happens if we remain in the world of the transitional object? What happens to our sense of self when we are relating to an object that mirrors back simply what we want to see?”

### THE COMPUTER'S GAZE: JENNICAM

In 1999, I attended a lecture at the University of Chicago while I was in graduate school there. Conceptual artist and writer Victor Burgin presented a talk about what was one of the first livestreams, pre-social media—the JenniCam—which was later published in the journal *Critical Inquiry*. Burgin argued that the JenniCam was actually not very new at all; in fact, it speaks to an ongoing wish to be known, to feel satisfied and comforted, to feel recognized.

JenniCam was a website created by a young woman named Jenni Ringley in her last year of college, on the eve of her 21st birthday. It was low-tech by today's standards: a webcam attached to her computer taking still images at three-minute intervals all day and uploading them to her website. At the time, much was said about Ringley's exhibitionist tendencies. Burgin took a different tack, noting the importance of the developmental moment at which this innovation takes place. Ringley, at 21, is just embarking on adulthood and leaving the comfortable bubble of undergraduate life. She desires to be known, recognized, as she is about to become a little fish in the big wide ocean. Among the audience during the 1999 lecture was Homi Bhabha, known for his contributions to postcolonial critical theory, who posited this thought in the Q and A period: Perhaps for Ringley the eyeball of the webcam was a transitional object, like a toddler's security blanket,

replacing the containing gaze of parents so she could become her own woman out in the world where there are other pleasures to have and discover. Bhabha was referring to Donald Winnicott's notion that in human development, transitional objects smooth the friction of our movement from the seamlessness of intrauterine life to the (hopefully) good-enough mother to weaning to being a subject in the world among other unpredictable, frustrating subjects.

### TALKING TO OURSELVES: THE CANDY HOUSE

In *The Candy House*, a novel published in 2022 by Jennifer Egan, another device, this one fictional, speaks to the fantasy that technology will provide holding and recognition. One of the characters, a Mark Zuckerberg-like character named Bix Bouton, creates a technology that can upload the entire library of a person's memory—conscious and unconscious, affect and thought—into a cube. One can then plug something like a VR set into the cube to “watch” scenes from one's life, or project them onto a screen for group viewing. Characters use it to return to childhood memories they thought were happy but realize are more complex. Throughout the novel, Egan traces the interlocking stories of many characters who are seeking connection or knowledge—some embracing the technology, others rejecting it. But sometimes the device knows too much, as when Roxy discovered her father's affair when she used it

to access his memories of a trip they took together to London.

Some characters attempt to evade the technology using AI-designed “proxies” that have access to every online utterance a person has made. For example, mothers attempt to fool their children into thinking they are communicating with them. “A proxy's job isn't deception so much as it is delay,” not unlike a blanket or pacifier allows the infant to hold out until the breast appears ready to feed. “Proxies succeed because people want to believe,” Egan writes.

Egan's proxies are not unlike the AI voice agent employed by real-life trickster Evan Ratliff who, in his October 2024 op-ed in *The New York Times*, describes the bewilderment and alienation that ensued when he unleashed it on his family and friends. The real satisfaction derived from transitional objects is but a hallucination of relief, and one that we can crash down from hard. Ratliff writes, “That sense of loneliness—the base reality that, fundamentally, you are only talking to yourself—may be the most lasting result of all these A.I. conversations.”

### NO SURPRISES: MRS. DAVIS

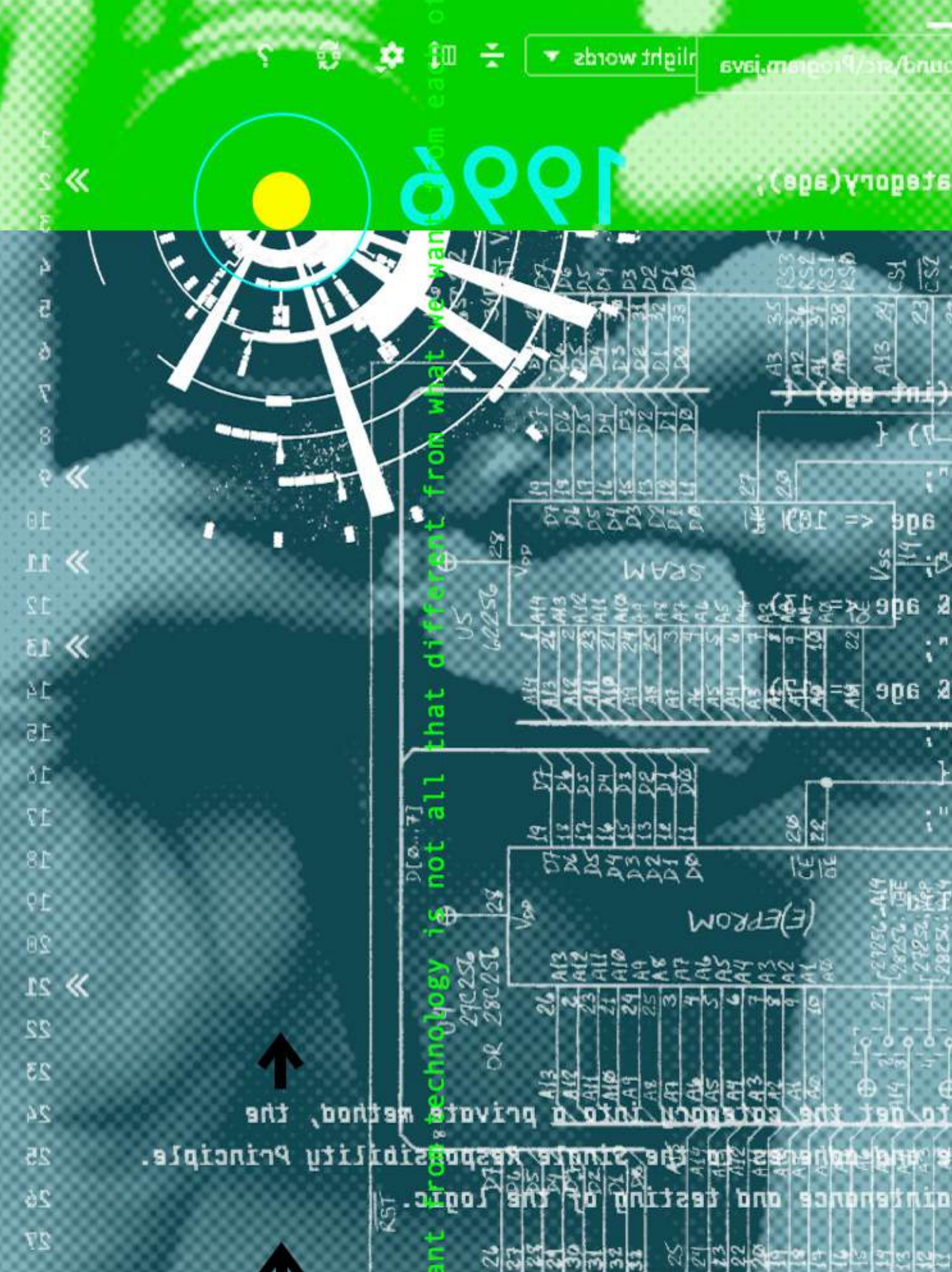
Another fantasy of AI is depicted in the show *Mrs. Davis*, which aired for one season on Peacock in the spring of 2023. This one is truly the embodiment of a perfectly attuned mother—anticipating needs, providing before the slippage

into hunger or boredom—and in this story it has transformed the world. The AI is named Mrs. Davis in the United States but in Italy they call her Madonna, in the UK she's Mum. Mrs. Davis is seemingly benevolent: There is no longer war, humans have a sense of purpose, there is no loneliness. But like in the dystopian utopias in adolescent science fiction—Camazotz in *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L'Engle, the society of sameness in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, George Orwell's world in *1984*—everything is eerily too perfect. In a world where one's desires are anticipated and known, there's no mystery. Nothing to discover, no way to be discovered. No surprises or being surprising.

On *Mrs. Davis*, we follow the protagonist Simone, a nun on a mission to destroy Mrs. Davis because the AI killed her father, a second-rate magician performing in Vegas. In the process there is another, hidden purpose that reveals cosmic and divine magic. Along this quest, a more mundane sort of magic occurs when one of the guides Simone encounters hands her a sandwich with ingredients—honey, butter, and beef bologna on white bread—that are unexpectedly delicious when combined. She didn't know she wanted it until she had it.

This is the trouble with the technological transitional object: It provides a comfort, a familiar state of being. It restores us to ourselves when the world is too much. And yet AI is all too familiar with us. Its very purpose is to know us, based on what is on the internet, much of which we have put out there ourselves. The algorithms learn the specific brand of indie folk music we





enjoy, then calculate how old we are, our income, and whom we follow on social media to determine whether we might, for instance, want to purchase a new pair of shoes. There is a sense of comfort in feeling gotten by it—that a familiar song you didn’t save comes next on the playlist, or that your social media feed shows you a clip from a cartoon you liked as a kid. But it is an uncomfortable comfort—too on the nose. It misses something incalculable: the meaning that comes out of the friction between humans, and between humans and the world.

GROWING UP DIGITAL

When he was three or four, if he was hungry and didn’t know what he felt like eating, my son would ask-command me, “Tell me what I want.” As mother, my job is knowing. But anyone who has tried to feed a young child knows, they do not simply eat what is in front of them. There is a little dance one does until one gets it right. He thinks I know, and I’m figuring out the formula of his likes and dislikes, but there is also the mutual delight of having him try something new that he finds delicious.

To know ourselves means knowing others as selves. Through Hegel, Lacan, and the baby-watchers like Beatrice Beebe and Daniel Stern, psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has formulated her own concept of transitional space, Thirdness, which takes us from “tell me what I want” to the existence of two desiring subjects, each with their own experience of self. It begins with the parent knowing the meaning of the child’s cry. It leads to the child knowing the parent not simply as provider, but as a self with desire and mystery all her own. Recognizing this, the child learns to know her own subjectivity. We go beyond the transactional nature of “tell me what I want” to “I know what you like.” You like your coffee light and sweet. You like to be wrapped up to your neck in a towel after bath. You don’t like to feel sandy. You feel sad on your birthday. You need space when you look like that.

But when we have everything we *think* we want, and everything is known, we lose a sense of our potential for magic and mystery. No one can surprise us. We know how the magician engineered the trick. It’s a world of Harry Harlow’s mechanical monkey-mothers—just providing the milk we need. The rhesus monkeys in the famous studies of parent-child attachment choose the plushy monkey, even though it did not feed them, because something else happens in the softness: bodies merge. Is that my skin or yours? What do we make together? As Adam Phillips wrote in *Giving Up*, “anyone who can satisfy us, anyone

who can make us feel better is going to be the same person who frustrates us and makes us feel worse.”

Artificial intelligence may fill in the gaps, soften the edges of frustrated desires, but what happens to the self when we are relating to objects that are designed to be frictionless? What happens if we remain in the world of the transitional object? What happens to our sense of self when we are relating to an object that mirrors back simply what we want to see? Not only does the world feel rather one-dimensional as it did in *Mrs. Davis*, but we also lose something of ourselves, too, as subjects, in this smoothing of the pleasure of surprise and the discomfort of the unknown. What happens when we are seeking answers from technology that, as Yuval Noah Harari describes in his 2024 book *Nexus*, is designed not to be a tool as much as it is an independent agent, acting on behalf of corporations or governments? What happens to the freedom and mastery of our own minds when we relinquish our intelligence—our power to create, think, remember—to artificial intelligence?

If you were to look online for the JenniCam website, no luck: It is long gone. Like a well-used lovey, it has served its purpose: The unconsciously planned obsolescence of these transitional objects ensures that they do not last beyond their purpose in the developmental arc of a human life. Ringley abandoned the project in 2003, and now she has disappeared from the public eye, avoiding social media and giving sparse interviews in the years since she closed down the site.

Unlike Millennials, Gen Y, Gen Z, and now Alphas, who have been born into a “Look at me!” online culture, Ringley and I started out offline. Born in 1976, Ringley is about my age, creeping toward 50, no longer the camgirl playing hide-and-seek with her audience. Perhaps, like me, Jenni is also making lunches, stealing teeth from under pillows, being passive-aggressive with her partner ... playing other kinds of hide-and-seek. Perhaps she no longer feels the need to be known so transparently. Perhaps she can relish the mysteries of her own desires. Perhaps she is growing up. ■

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“**F**aculty are challenged to reject what [Paulo] Freire terms the ‘banking’ view of education in which an all-knowing faculty member imparts knowledge to candidates.”

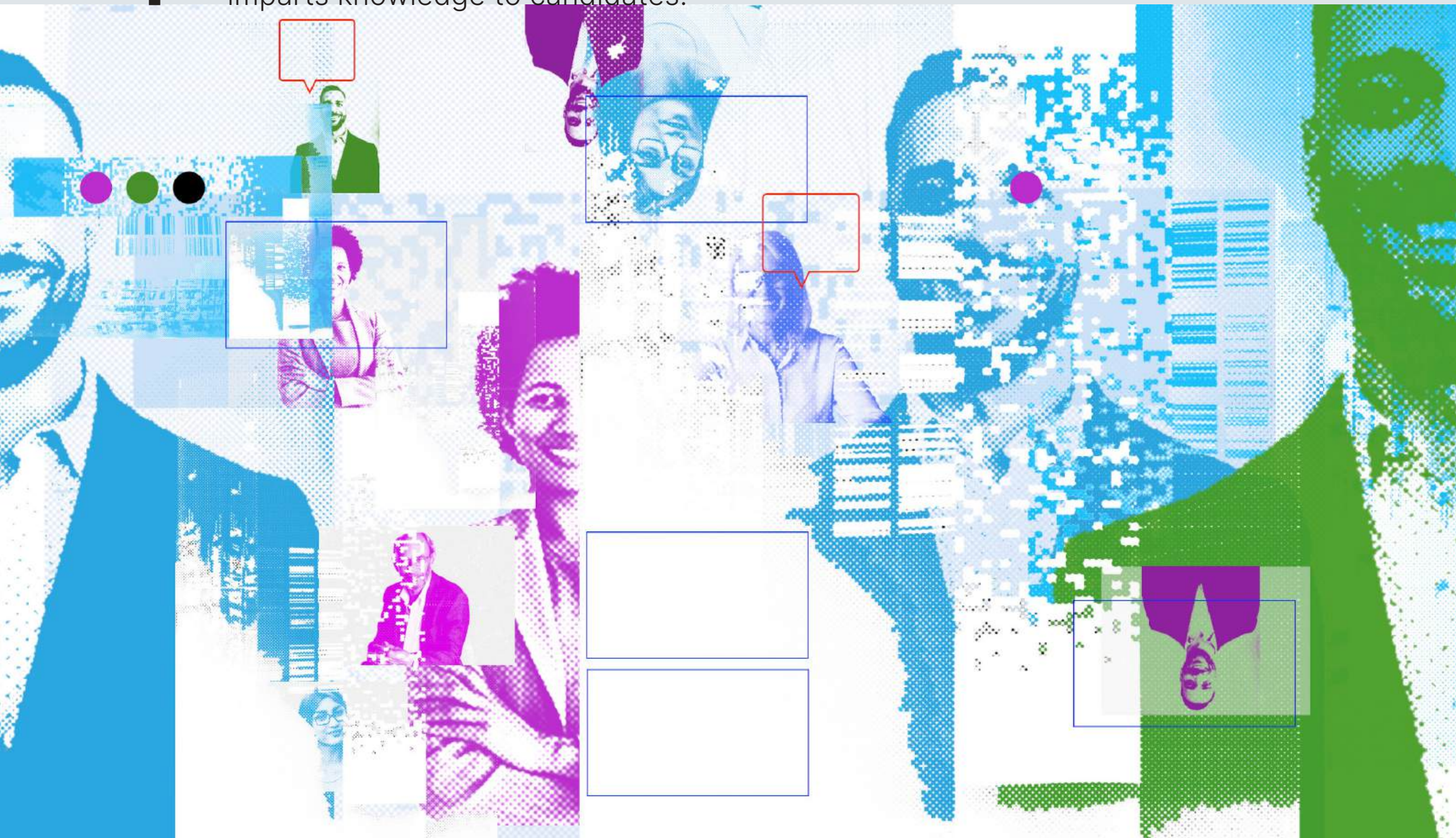


Illustration by Austin Hughes

## PSYCHOANALYTIC EDUCATION IN A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Candidates and faculty respond to online and hybrid classrooms

BY KATHERINE WILLIAMS

**W**HEN I WAS in graduate school one of my professors gave a lecture on the treatment of patients with psychosis that made such an impression on me that it sent my career in a new direction. He and I have often mused in the years since how unaware he was that day that his lecture would have such a huge influence on one of his students. In a similar vein, in my own years of teaching it has been deeply gratifying to have students and candidates communicate to me how what was said in the classroom space shaped aspects of their clinical practice. These experiences illustrate how important the didactic component of candidate education is. The classroom can become a space of transformation and growth for both candidates and the faculty who facilitate the learning process.

The pandemic reconfigured this space—perhaps permanently.

At the annual winter meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association (APSA) in February 2020, I was part of the Distance Education Study Group, which met to discuss our agenda for future work. We had no awareness that morning that



**I**t is strange that we have these deep, meaningful relationships now with people online, but we might not be able to recognize them on the street. There is a sense of being disembodied. And if I do recognize them on the street would it be acceptable to talk to them and would they recognize me?—FACULTY STUDY PARTICIPANT

within a month our lives would be altered by the COVID-19 pandemic, or that our group would be called on to respond to the educational needs of institutes and centers across the county. By March, national and international lockdowns halted all in-person instruction at schools, universities, and psychoanalytic training institutes and centers.

Many training programs in the United States had been running online programs for some time before the COVID-19 pandemic. These programs most often used a hybrid model of instruction in which local candidates met in a classroom while geographically distant candidates joined the classroom online using platforms such as Zoom. However, many programs had limited experience in conducting online education, and some faculty and candidates initially struggled to make the adaptation. To assist faculty, the Distance Education Study Group collaborated with the APsA COVID-19 Advisory Task Force to issue a guide on best practices for online teaching. In addition, the study group decided to conduct an exploratory study to gain insight on how faculty and candidates experience online education. A qualitative study was designed with a series of semistructured listening group sessions conducted via Zoom, first with candidates and then with faculty. What follows is a description of the findings and recommendations that resulted.

### CANDIDATE RESPONSES

The candidate listening groups met via Zoom over the summer of 2020, after the initial COVID-19 lockdowns. At the start of the pandemic onsite candidates (those who had been meeting in person) had more to adapt to than online candidates (those

who had already been using virtual platforms). Whereas many online candidates had been attending classes and supervision online for years before the pandemic, many onsite candidates reported an acute sense of loss with respect to onsite classes. One onsite candidate commented that she missed being able to visit the institute library and talk informally with senior analysts who could often be found reading there.

Candidates expressed that some faculty found it challenging to make the transition to online teaching. In one case a faculty member who had previously been an engaging teacher reverted to an all-lecture teaching style that was not engaging to candidates. Online teaching also appears to shine a spotlight on ineffective teaching. As one candidate commented, “a boring in-person teacher is a very boring teacher online.”

### Hybrid Challenges

Prior to the pandemic, institutes and centers that had online candidates most often ran hybrid classrooms where onsite candidates attended classes in person and geographically distant candidates joined the class via an online platform such as Zoom. Hybrid classrooms pose many challenges for both teachers and for students. Teachers are required to divide their attention between students in the physical classroom and candidates online. Thus, online candidates reported that they often felt neglected by both the onsite candidates and faculty. Onsite candidates, in turn, expressed often feeling disconnected from online candidates.

With the pandemic, all classes shifted to online platforms, and both the onsite candidates and the online candidates reported that the quality of the teaching and classroom engagement had

improved vastly. Onsite candidates stated that the transition to virtual supervision went more smoothly than the transition to the virtual classrooms, however. Some candidates commented that they did not feel as close to their supervisors as before the pandemic, and that some supervisors initially had difficulties operating the technology.

Therefore, an important finding is that *candidates felt that the quality of the classroom experience was improved if all candidates were online for class*. Having all candidates online created a sense of equality and group cohesion in the learning process.

Nevertheless, many training programs will likely continue to conduct hybrid classes, possibly because candidates might express a need for in-person instruction. One potential solution could be for all classes to be held online and for cohorts to meet in person at agreed upon dates on site. This educational model is employed by many universities running distance education doctoral programs. For this model to work, international candidates may require travel vouchers and the provision of local accommodation.

### Engagement

In this study, relationships both with fellow candidates and faculty were felt to be very important. Some candidates expressed that in-person peer relationships and collegiality were the biggest casualties of online education and that this loss was keenly felt. However, onsite candidates did express valuing the experience of training with international candidates, most of whom were training online. Recommendations emerged on how training centers can

support the creation of relationships, both onsite and online. Faculty in particular can

- meet individually with each candidate before the start of a seminar;
- make time for candidates to talk before or after class;
- encourage the forming of peer groups;
- hold office hours; and
- be available to respond to candidate questions and concerns.

For example, one faculty member met with a consultant to receive input on how to more effectively engage online candidates, reporting that online candidates in her class often appeared to be disengaged in the learning process. The faculty member felt frustrated and not effective in her online teaching and felt dread at the prospect of teaching her next online class. The consultant suggested that before the start of the new class the faculty member arrange a short one-on-one Zoom meeting with each candidate to build a relationship with each of them. The candidates responded enthusiastically to the one-on-one meetings, stating that they felt seen and that they felt their learning mattered to the faculty member. This in turn resulted in a more engaged and cohesive classroom experience for both the candidates and the faculty member.

### Infantilization

An important theme that emerged was that candidates felt infantilized by the analytic training process. This subject has



frequently been written about in the analytic literature. For example, psychoanalyst Luke Hodge states that “there appear to be experiences, almost ‘universal,’ that most candidates undergo as part of the nature of training and the structures of institutes. Competition, envy, insecurity, exclusion, ambition, regression and infantilization.” These issues pose a significant risk to candidate retention. Faculty should therefore develop a collaborative pedagogical stance that is open to an experience of colearning with candidates.

The work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire provides a useful model. In Freire’s view, the process of education is an act of liberation for the student both intellectually and psychologically. Faculty are challenged to reject what Freire terms the “banking” view of education in which an all-knowing faculty member imparts knowledge to candidates. Rather, Freire would suggest that faculty *engage in problem-posing pedagogy in which faculty and candidate collaboratively engage in the process of learning and where faculty are open to the possibility of learning from candidates.* For example, faculty members may discuss their own ongoing clinical work with advanced candidates and focus on problem cases, seeking the clinical input of candidates. This not only demonstrates willingness to learn from candidates but also models that learning to be an analyst is a lifetime task. This stance is especially appropriate in psychoanalytic education, as candidates most often enter training with extensive professional experience.

## FACULTY RESPONSES

The majority of faculty in this sample had experience with online teaching before the pandemic, teaching hybrid classes with local candidates in the class and international candidates online. As faculty settled into the experience of fully online teaching, some expressed ambivalence. One stated, “Online teaching is a double-edged sword. I am glad we have it, but I am very sad, almost melancholy, about the prospect of not going back in person.”

Most of the faculty in this sample were trained onsite, which inevitably informed their view of optimal candidate education. Faculty commented how onsite instruction promotes a sense of personal connection, which in turn leads to spontaneous discourse in the classroom. There is also the simple pleasure of being with others in person. One faculty member talked about how he used to enjoy handing out candy in his seminar. Faculty also discussed the importance of the physical space of the institute or center as humans need to have a “home.” One faculty member described in an amused tone how, as a

candidate, he had a favorite classroom chair. He conveyed that he no longer felt the same level of need for the physical space of the institute, but he recognized that at one time he did have that need. This comment draws our attention to the many ways in which psychoanalytic education is a developmental process for candidates.

### Online Advantages

Faculty in this sample supported online education, viewing the medium as a path to expand and include more people in the field. One faculty member who trained in a country with no local training programs commented, “without online classes I would have had no contact with the psychoanalytic world.” However, several faculty expressed concern about the potential total loss of onsite classes. For some this fear extends to a potential loss of their institutes. As one faculty member expressed, “I look at all this wave of online programming and think I would want to join in, but also this could be the death knell to my small institute.” Some faculty felt concern about the potential loss of in-person connection. One poignantly commented on how, as people, we “feel each other”:

It is strange that we have these deep, meaningful relationships now with people online, but we might not be able to recognize them on the street. There is a sense of being disembodied. And if I do recognize them on the street would it be acceptable to talk to them and would they recognize me?

Many of the faculty also liked the convenience of online teaching, which obviated the need to travel. One stated, “I am most likely never again going to drive two hours to teach a class.” Older faculty members often do not want to drive at night or in states with inclement winter weather. These faculty members could potentially be retained in an online teaching format. Faculty retention allows candidates to continue to benefit from the teaching of senior faculty, who get to remain involved in institute life.

### Hybrid Challenges (Redux)

Like candidates, faculty stated that they found the hybrid classroom to be the least effective. A hybrid classroom is especially challenging for faculty as they need to divide attention between candidates in the physical classroom and candidates online. Nevertheless, it appears that the hybrid

classroom, despite the challenges, will remain the norm for psychoanalytic education. It seems unlikely that institutes and centers will abandon their buildings and by implication their physical classrooms.

With that in mind, we should continue to explore how to conduct hybrid classes as effectively as possible. In general, it is helpful

- for faculty and onsite students who are speaking to face the screen in hybrid classes; and
- for faculty to create an open space for candidates to discuss problems and frustrations.

While faculty need to display a positive attitude toward online and hybrid classes, this does not exclude having a constructive and honest dialogue with candidates regarding classroom frustrations and problems. Not all problems and frustrations can be resolved, but students feel heard and validated if they can give voice to challenges experienced in the learning process.

### Engagement And Depth

Classroom engagement is of critical importance. Some faculty expressed concern about the level of discourse that was possible online. Some felt it was difficult to establish a true seminar-style class. Moreover, candidates who tend to dominate in an in-person classroom tend to do so more online, and quiet students are quieter when online.

One of the most important strategies is for faculty to *model engagement for the class by encouraging the creation of an active learning environment online.* Recommendations include

- using clinical examples to help with learning of complex clinical theory;
- using online break-out rooms;
- assigning written exercises or discussion threads ahead of classes; and
- creating and distributing PowerPoint slides prior to class (especially helpful to students learning in a second language).

Faculty also discussed the issue of classroom size and the impact. Often there is a misunderstanding that student capacity is not important in online classes. Based on the findings in this study, online classes should ideally be no larger than 12 candidates. Too many candidates brings about a significant negative impact on a candidate’s ability to participate and learn.

### Revitalizing The Curriculum

Candidate training is based on a tripartite model consisting of a personal analysis, supervision of control cases, and a didactic curriculum. It is said that candidates consider the personal analysis to be most useful, followed by supervision and then didactic classroom instruction. It is concerning that didactic education has become the ugly duckling of analytic training, as it provides candidates with essential theoretical and technical skills, as well as an opportunity to form a learning community with other candidates and faculty. Additionally, a recent study found that candidates enter training with high expectations of the didactic part of their training. It is therefore imperative that faculty engage candidates in vitalizing classroom experiences.

There are those who maintain that only an onsite training experience is acceptable; and there are those who would have us abandon all onsite teaching in favor of online training. We need to be careful not to establish yet another binary in psychoanalysis. Rather, institutes and centers need to pedagogically flexible and establish training programs that meet the needs of candidates. For many programs, this translates into some mix of online and onsite classes. This exploratory study and the education literature suggest that candidates can and do learn in online classes and that many of the candidates view online education favorably. However, many candidates express a strong need for in-person contact.

How to meet this need is both a challenge and an opportunity for institutes and centers to think creatively. The postpandemic world provides us an opportunity to consider how best to reconstruct our classroom instruction and to evaluate our approaches to candidate education in general. The future of our profession is dependent on how successful we are at this challenging and exciting task. ■

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